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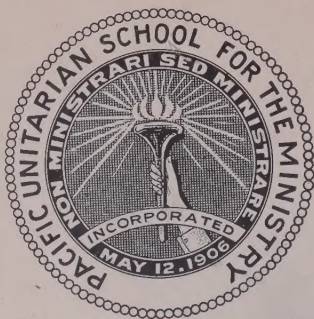
First Church and the

Tabernacle Church in Salem

in which the duties of

churches are discussed a

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CORRESPONDENCE

BETWEEN

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AND

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CORRESPONDENCE

BETWEEN

THE FIRST CHURCH

AND

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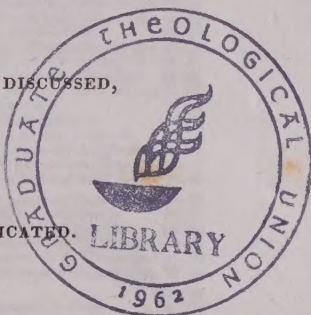
IN SALEM.

IN WHICH

THE DUTIES OF CHURCHES ARE DISCUSSED,

AND THE

RIGHTS OF CONSCIENCE VINDICATED.



"How vain then are those, that, assuming a liberty to themselves, would yet tie all men to their tenets; conjuring all men to the trace of their steps, when it may be, what is truth to them, is error to another as wise."

FELLTHAM'S RESOLVES.

SALEM:

PRESS OF FOOTE AND BROWN.

1832.



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At a meeting of the Church of the First Congregational Society in Salem, at the house of the Rev. Mr. Upham, Feb. 18, and by adjournment Feb. 19, 1832, the following proceedings were adopted :

The Committee appointed to correspond with the Tabernacle Church on the subject of Mrs. Baker's application to be recommended to the communion of the First Church, and who were subsequently instructed to consider and reply to the charge of that church respecting the christian character of this church, having reported a full answer thereto, in the form of a letter addressed to the Tabernacle Church, it was thereupon voted, that the same be accepted.

And whereas the Tabernacle Church, in their last communication to this Church, appear to have taken leave of the correspondence on this subject, while they manifest a perfect readiness to receive information and satisfaction that their said charge is unfounded ; and whereas the answer now reported is designed to give such information and satisfaction to all the members of that church, and may be useful to others, also, laboring under similar erroneous impressions, which purposes cannot be accomplished without printing the same : therefore voted—

That the Committee who reported the answer, be directed and authorized to cause the same to be printed, together with so much of the correspondence and proceedings connected therewith, as they may judge expedient ; and that a copy of the publication be communicated to the Tabernacle Church.

Copy of Record.

Attest,

JOHN PRINCE,

Senior Pastor of the First Church in Salem.

CORRESPONDENCE.

The Church of the First Congregational Society in Salem, }
to the Tabernacle Church :

CHRISTIAN BRETHREN,

We have duly received your reply dated the 17th of January, to our communication addressed to you on the 8th of November last, vindicating this church from your charge against it of having manifested "an entire disregard to the discipline of your church, by readily admitting to its communion those who have been excommunicated by you." Our refutation of this charge appeared to us so complete and satisfactory, that we cannot conceal our surprise at the manner in which it has been received by you, and your want of candor in not retracting a charge so clearly proved to be groundless and unjust. But it is not our intention here to go into any examination of your reply, having no disposition to extend this discussion unnecessarily, and finding nothing in the principles or facts stated by you, which materially affects the merits of our defence against this charge.

But the manner in which you allude to and reiterate your other charge, which you now represent as a "charge of a dereliction from the great doctrines of Christianity," has led us to think it more important than we had supposed, to give to that also a full and thorough consideration. We are the more encouraged to undertake this from your having expressed "the pleasure which you should experience on ascertaining that this, your *far weightier* charge, is equally unfounded." We may, therefore, expect your candid attention, and if you will but favor us with that, we have no doubt of being able to afford you such pleasure in the fullest degree, and also to convince you, upon serious reflection, that your charge is no less presumptuous than unwar-

rantable, no less inconsistent with your own character as protestant professors, than it is injurious to ours as christian believers.

The hope of thus leading your minds into more enlarged and just views of the rights and duties of christians, in respect to each other, will be our principal motive in going into a far more extended consideration of the subject, than the immediate occasion requires.

Your charge respecting the christian character of this church was originally stated as in the first part of the following vote :—

“ Unanimously Voted, That this church cannot grant the request of Mrs. Martha Baker, for the reasons following, viz :

First, Because this church cannot consistently recognise any church as a “ sister church,” which, in our judgment, rejects those doctrines that we feel bound to receive as the fundamental doctrines of christianity ; and

Secondly, Because this church cannot consent to hold fellowship with any church which manifests an entire disregard to the discipline of this church, and which, by readily admitting to its communion those who have been excommunicated by us, virtually declares the disciplinary acts of this church to be ‘ null and void.’ ”

You justly regard the charge first alleged here, especially as now represented by you, to be “ far weightier” than the other, for so it certainly is as it respects the responsibility of those who make such a charge ; but to those who think it “ a very small thing to be judged of you, or by man’s judgment,” it is, indeed, light. We differ from you no farther than you do from us ; and if we are to be judged as rejecting fundamental doctrines, because we adhere to the bible alone, exclusive of all human systems of divinity, you, for coupling such systems with the bible, may be judged as “ receiving for doctrines the commandments of men,” and “ making the word of God of none effect,” through your unscriptural creeds and confessions. “ Let us not, therefore, judge one another any more.” If we are conscientious in our opinions, no error in our respective views of christian doctrine can be so great as that of uncharitably judging and condemning each other. The following passage from a dis-

course of the amiable and learned Seed, a very orthodox clergyman of the English Church, deserves the serious attention of all those who are liable to fall into this great error. "Whether a good man," says he, "who is a misbeliever in some points, without any faultiness or irregularity of will, will be damned for his *erroneous* way of thinking, may be a question with some people; but I think it admits of none, that a man will be damned for an *uncharitable* way of thinking and acting."* And this, you will perceive, is but a comment upon the apostle's declaration, that although he might understand all mysteries, and have all faith, and yet have not charity, he was nothing.

We beg leave, in the first place, to make a few remarks upon certain statements in your Rev. Pastor's letter communicating the vote of your church respecting Mrs. Baker. This vote appears to us to present a rule of proceeding as novel as it is extraordinary; but your Rev. Pastor states that it "is not regarded as presenting any new view of the principle on which, in relation to other churches, you have long felt it your duty to act." This representation, we think, must have proceeded from a misrecollection, or inexperience, as to the past history and affairs of your church; for so recently as since the settlement of our junior pastor, an instance has occurred of a recommendation from this church to yours, which we have always understood was received with the usual courtesy. And it is deserving of remark, that, in considering Mr. Brown's application to be recommended by you to this church, you do not appear to intimate that there was any question about recommending him, on account of the church to which he wished to become united. On the contrary, the question, at that time, seems never to have been raised. This church certainly, during its existence of more than two hundred years, has known of no such principle, as you now set up, in its intercourse with other churches, either in receiving or granting recommendations of members who wished to transfer their connexion to or from this church. Within our own knowledge, repeated instances of this kind of christian courtesy, both in re-

* "Discourses"—Vol. 2, p. 81.

commending and receiving members, have taken place between this and other churches, of as high reputed orthodoxy as your church, and whose pastors are in full fellowship with your pastor. It is but a few years since, that a member of the Third Church in this town, who for some time had worshipped with us, and who requested of that church "a dismissal and recommendation to the First Church," was, agreeably to his request, "unanimously recommended to the christian watch and fellowship of the said First Church." This recommendation was signed by the present worthy pastor of the Third Church, who in so doing did but act in conformity to immemorial christian usage, and in that spirit of "orthodoxy and charity united," which led the excellent Dr. Watts to exclaim, "I see, I feel, and am assured, that several men may be very sincere, and yet entertain notions in divinity all widely different."

Here was an example worthy of your imitation. Why should it not have been followed in the case of Mrs. Baker? It seems to have been the plain, natural, and christian course for you to pursue. We regret that your Rev. Pastor should see occasion so emphatically to state to us, that in taking a directly opposite course, there was "not the slightest hesitation or difference of opinion, on the part of the church, as to the course proper to be pursued." For this seems to indicate that you had already yielded to the influence of that exclusive sectarian spirit, which is at war with the charity of the gospel, and which we had hoped would not reach our peaceful community. How otherwise can we account for such unanimity, upon such a question, and under such circumstances? Could it have resulted from a dispassionate exercise of your reason and judgment upon the merits of the question? Could you have been thus unanimous, had you impartially examined the subject in all its important relations? Could you, in that case, have wholly set at nought the claims of the First Church to your christian candor and courtesy? Should you have regarded as nothing its ancient foundation in Christ, its devotion to the bible alone as the rule of faith and worship, and its uniform support of the great principles of christian truth, freedom and

charity? Could you have established a precedent so adverse to the christian liberty of your own members, had you well considered that it is their individual right and duty, whenever conscience enlightened by divine truth shall require it of them, to leave your communion for such as may be more conducive to their edification? And could you have been wholly indifferent as to the influence of your example upon the peace and harmony of the christian community? We feel persuaded, had you thus considered the subject, you would have doubted the soundness of the principle upon which you proceeded; and had you considered also that the great responsibility, which rests upon us all, respects not the faith of others so much as our own practice, you would have chosen to err, if err you must, on the side of christian charity and peace.

If our apprehensions as to the influence of such an exclusive spirit among you be well founded, suffer us to entreat you to resist and suppress it, as the deadliest foe to the true christian spirit. Freed from this influence, you might enjoy that divine charity, which would restrain you from charging us with a "dereliction from the great doctrines of christianity," and might possibly be led into that free and impartial inquiry after truth, which would enable you to see those doctrines in the same light with us. For, as the venerated Baxter says, "be you never so peremptory in your opinions, you cannot resolve to hold them to the end; for light is powerful, and may change you whether you will or no; you cannot tell what that light will do which you never saw. But prejudice will make you resist the light, and make it harder for you to understand."*

"The only means by which religious knowledge can be advanced," says Bishop Lowth, "is freedom of inquiry. An opinion is not therefore false, because it contradicts received notions; but, whether true or false, let it be submitted to a fair examination. Truth must in the end be a gainer by it, and appear with greater advantage."†

* 1 Baxter's Works, 42.

† Visitation Sermon, 1758.

“Truth and error,” says a late eloquent orthodox divine, “as they are essentially opposite in their nature, so the causes to which they are indebted for their perpetuity and triumph are not less so. Whatever retards a spirit of inquiry, is favorable to error; whatever promotes it, to truth. But nothing, it will be acknowledged, has a greater tendency to obstruct the exercise of free inquiry, than the spirit and feeling of a party.”*

The vote of your church, containing your “weightier charge,” and exhibiting the main principle upon which you refuse to recommend Mrs. Baker to the First Church, is indeed important in a general view, and deserves from you, certainly, a fuller consideration than you appear to have given it. This principle in its operation concerns not merely the First Church, and the Tabernacle Church, but other churches also, and affects the rights of the individual members of your church, and of all churches which may be influenced by the example of yours. The subject thus becomes identified with the great cause of christian truth and liberty, as well as with that of christian peace and charity, and acquires an importance which could not attach to the particular question which has led to this discussion. But it did not appear to affect the character of this church so directly, or make it so incumbent upon us to reply to it, as your more specific charge of a wanton disregard to your rules of discipline.

It could not appear to us of any great consequence, as respects our christian standing, that you should judge us to have rejected what you deem fundamental doctrines, while we are conscious of retaining all which we deem fundamental, and are not charged with unfaithfulness in the use of the scriptures. We know that wise and good men, in all ages of the world, have differed in opinion, especially on the subject of religion, which, probably, from the very constitution of the human mind, must always be the case, and that, while some christians embrace certain doctrines as fundamental, others will reject them as erroneous, who are equally conscientious and

* Robert Hall—“Terms of Communion.”

faithful in the study of the holy scriptures. Such differences of opinion do not necessarily bring reproach upon any party, nor need they occasion a breach of the great law of love and charity, which all will admit to be the fundamental law of christianity.

In answering and refuting so fully and so satisfactorily, as we believed, your charge respecting a disregard of your discipline, we indulged a hope that you would be led to a revision of your whole proceedings respecting Mrs. Baker's application, and to a retraction of both your charges. The principle which you avowed, as the basis of your proceedings, appeared to us so opposite to the meekness and charity of the gospel, so nearly akin to the spirit of popery, and so irreconcilable with the principles of the protestant faith, as well as the liberty wherewith Christ has made us free, that we could not believe your more deliberate judgment would approve it. But being disappointed in this expectation, and finding that, so far from reversing your proceedings, you repeat your charge against this church in an aggravated tone and manner, we feel bound to enter into a full examination of the subject of your vote in all its bearings, as to the duty of churches towards each other and towards their own members, as to the rights of conscience, and as to the character and claims of this church. You will allow us to speak to you with freedom, as well as fullness, on this subject; but we would not do it so much in the tone of admonition, which the platform permits from one church to another, as in that of affectionate expostulation, accompanied by rational arguments, and weighty suggestions from the works of eminent christian authors, whose memory we all revere, though we do not regard them as of any authority in matters of faith, excepting as they accord with Christ and his apostles. We shall freely draw from the writings of such authors, especially those of an established orthodox reputation, or who were under no bias from the controversies of our time, to illustrate and enforce the great principles under discussion; knowing that whatever comes from such a source will justly have more weight with you, than any arguments which we might frame. Our sole object is to produce conviction in your minds, as to the truth of these great principles. We have no

disposition to a controversy with you upon any of the doctrines which you may be supposed to hold, however gratifying to us it might be to have you embrace those which we believe to be true. On the contrary, we would strenuously maintain your right to hold and avow them, or any which you may be led to adopt as christian doctrines, coupled only with the obligation to allow us the exercise of the same right without forfeiting our claim, as christians, to your charity. Why may it not be so? Why may not such an obligation be mutually felt and acknowledged? We enjoy each other's confidence, as members of the same community, in the civil and social relations of life, where we meet in the spirit of mutual candor, and appreciate integrity wherever it is found to exist. Why should it not be so in our religious relations? Why should we not here also regard each other in the true spirit of candor, and appreciate christian integrity as we find it exemplified in the life, and not according to speculative views, which, however erroneous they may seem to us, may have resulted from as honest and conscientious inquiries after divine truth, as we have been able to make in forming our own religious opinions? A disposition to receive the truth, and sincerity and faithfulness in seeking for it, are all that we can strictly call our own in this great concern. Infallibility appertains to no human being. The most exalted understanding may err, while the humblest may honestly seek for the truth, and thus commend itself to God, though it should miss of finding the truth.

Professing, as we do, to hold the same inspired volume as the standard of our faith and duty, and to be under the same obligation to examine it for ourselves, without attaching authority to any human interpretation, it seems necessarily to follow, that we ought to admit each other's integrity in this high trust, as readily as in lower ones, and recognize each other's christian claims accordingly. Shall we, instead of this, judge the integrity of others by comparing the result of their inquiries with that to which we have attained, and thus make our interpretation of scripture a test for trying their soundness in the faith, or their claim to our charity? Is not such conduct presumptuous and

essentially popish, and has it not led to unchristian animosities and dissensions in every age of the church, and thereby prevented the genuine influence of our holy religion among men?

It must then be a common object with all enlightened friends of christianity to remove this scandal from the church, and to promote an opposite spirit, the spirit of love and peace, which is the true badge of the disciples of Christ. This object, we may hope, will be advanced by every fair discussion, which tends to diffuse among christians correct knowledge as to the nature and foundation of their religious rights, and to lead them to the exercise of mutual candor, as to the motives and principles by which they are actuated in the enjoyment of them. We could not therefore doubt, even had you been silent on the subject, that you would accompany us with pleasure in this discussion, and receive whatever valuable information we may be able to collect and present to you, in the same christian spirit in which we hope to communicate it.

From the time of the primitive ages of christianity, the churches, which have been formed professedly upon its principles, have been prone to forget the design of their institution, and the laws to which they are subject, and to manifest a spirit directly opposite to that of Christ and his apostles. We have therefore proposed, before proceeding to consider the subject of your vote in particular reference to this church, to take a view of the duties of christian churches, and the principles which ought to govern them, more especially in their relations with each other, and in respect to the admission of members, and recommending them from one church to another.

The general duty of churches has been well stated by the late Robert Hall, who applied to this subject the full force of his clear and powerful mind. "The duty of churches," says he, "originates in that of the individuals of which they consist, so that when we have ascertained the sentiments and principles which ought to actuate the christian in his private capacity, we possess the standard to which the practice of churches should be uniformly adjusted."* Here we see the obligation which rests upon all

* Reasons for Christian in opposition to Party Communion

churches, not only to adhere strictly to the laws of Christ in conducting their government and discipline, but to manifest, in all their conduct and proceedings, those sentiments and principles of justice, candor, charity, humility and good will, which the gospel so constantly enjoins upon the practice of individuals. Considering, indeed, that these virtues constitute so principal a part of the religion of Christ, and that churches are formed to promote this religion in the world, as well as for their own edification, it seems peculiarly incumbent on them to exhibit a bright example of all the christian virtues.

From the writings of the New Testament we must of course learn the nature, duties, and mutual connexion of churches. There we find that the word church, which is of the same import as assembly or congregation, is used to signify either the whole body of believers, the universal church, or those particular societies of christians, formed in different places, which together constituted the universal church, and sustained the same relation to Christ their common head and lawgiver. These of course were sister churches, a relation resulting from their very nature and condition. "However familiar," says the eloquent writer just referred to, "the spectacle of christian societies, who have no fellowship or intercourse with each other, has become, he who consults the New Testament will instantly perceive that nothing more repugnant to the dictates of inspiration, or the practice of the first and purest age, can be conceived. When we turn our eyes to the primitive times, we behold one church of Christ, and one only, in which, when new assemblies of christians arose, they were considered, not as multiplying, but diffusing it; not as destroying its unity, or impairing its harmony, but being fitly compacted together on the same foundation, as a mere accession to the beauty and grandeur of the whole."

The same relation must still subsist among all christian societies, or particular churches, certainly all those which are formed after the primitive model, and built upon the principles of protestantism, or true principles of gospel liberty. Such churches are sister churches, whether they acknowledge the relation or not. Even should they so far forget it, as to indulge in unchristian

feelings and bitter recriminations towards each other, and make it a point of conscience to deny that they have any christian relation whatever ; yet it remains a fact, independent of their will, that they are sister churches, having one common Lord and Master, who has enjoined upon them the same divine rules of faith and duty, and that they owe to each other all the courtesy and kindness which such a relation implies.

In the interpretation of the scriptures containing these divine rules, they have of course the same right of private judgment, are under the same obligation to use the reason which God has given them to ascertain their true meaning, and to follow the light of their own judgment and conscience, without submitting to any control or dictation from others, or attempting to interfere with them in the exercise and enjoyment of this common right. Differences of opinion, arising from an honest interpretation of these divine rules, are admissible upon the foundation principle of protestant churches ; and a proper sense of the perfect equality which subsists among them as to their rights and duties respecting each other, will always be sufficient to secure mutual respect amidst diversity of sentiments, and to preserve "the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace."

But "if," adds the same admired writer on this subject, "amidst the infinite diversity of opinions, each society deems it necessary to render its own peculiarities the basis of union, as though the design of christians in forming themselves into a church, were not to exhibit the great principles of the gospel, but to give publicity and effect to party distinctions ; all hope of restoring christian harmony and unanimity must be abandoned. When churches are thus constituted, instead of enlarging the sphere of christian charity, they become so many hostile confederacies."* What a dereliction is this from every principle of protestantism, as well as gospel liberty and peace ! Nothing can be clearer, than that receiving the scriptures as the common standard of faith, with the acknowledged right of private judgment, involves the obligation of mutual candor and charity, in our endeavors to understand them and ascertain the truths which they reveal. "Can any man," says Dr. Dod-

*Terms of Communion.

dridge, "with the least color of reason, pretend that I have a right to judge for myself, and yet punish me for using it? That is, for doing that which he acknowledges I have a right to do. To plead for it would be a direct contradiction in terms."*

You will find in the works of this learned author, who was not less catholic than orthodox, much that is calculated to subserve the cause of christian peace and charity. "Union of affection, amidst diversity of opinions," appears to have been his motto. In explaining the apostolic direction, "be like minded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind," he says, "be unanimous in affection, if you cannot be so in opinion, agree on cultivating the same love, however your judgments, yea, and in some instances your practices, may be divided." "The best of men differ, their understandings differ, various associations have been accidentally formed, and different principles have been innocently, and perhaps devoutly admitted, which, even in a course of just and sensible reasoning, must necessarily lead to different conclusions. Accordingly we find that the wisest and the best of men have pleaded the cause on either side of various questions, which to both have seemed important, without being able to produce conviction." "Let us be greatly upon our guard that we do not condemn our brethren, as having forfeited all title to the name of christians, because their creeds or confessions of faith do not come up to the standard of our own."†

A learned contemporary author, and of the like catholic spirit with Doddridge, has also well described that kind of union, which it is the duty of churches to cultivate in order to christian harmony and intercourse. "Herein it is," says he, "that true *christian unity* does consist; not so much in uniformity of opinion as in unanimity of affection, in love and peace, in mutual charity and good will, and in all kind and friendly offices, as it becometh brethren in Jesus Christ. We are therefore exhorted as christians, to keep—not an unity of opinion in the bond of *ignorance*, nor an unity of profession in the bond of *hypocrisy*, but an *unity of spirit in the bond of peace*."‡

* Works, 4v. 473. † Idem, 282. ‡ True Doctrine of the N. T. 16.

Another contemporary and kindred genius, the distinguished Dr. Foster, observes : " If we are contented with the scripture rule, we may unite in affection and brotherly communion, though we cannot in opinion." " To agree in opinion is entirely out of our power ; to profess alike, while we believe differently, is base and dishonest, and destructive of the most sacred obligations, and upon that account, ought never to be the matter of our choice ; so that neither of these can be any part of that unity which we are bound to cultivate as a religious and moral duty ; but the whole sum of it must be resolved into this, that condescension, mutual forbearance, and an harmony of mild, benevolent affections, supply the place of that uniformity of faith and profession, which is, morally speaking, impossible."*

The learned Howe, author of "The Living Temple," and one of the very excellent among the old orthodox divines, speaks as follows of the wisdom of the apostolic practice upon this subject. " The case was at that time urging and important. A great and numerous party was formed of such as did nauseate the simplicity of the christian religion, and the true design of it. All the care was, what course was most proper and suitable to preserve the rest. Counsel was not taken to this effect ; let us bind them by certain devised preter-evangelical canons to things never thought to be enjoined by Christ himself, severely urge the strict and uniform observance of them, make the terms of christian communion straiter than he ever made them, add new rituals of our own to his institution, and cut off from us all that never so conscientiously scruple them. No ; this was the practice of their enemies, and it was to narrow and weaken the too much already diminished christian interest."

" Yea, the attempt of imposing any thing upon the disciples, but what was necessary, is judged a tempting of God ; a bringing the matter to a trial of skill with him, whether he could keep the church quiet, when they took so direct a course to distemper and trouble it. The prudence and piety of those unerring guides of the church, themselves under the guidance of the spirit

* Discourses on Natural Religion and Social Virtue—v. 2. p. 331.

of truth, directed them to bring the things wherein they would have christians unite within as narrow a compass as possible, neither multiplying articles of faith, nor rites of worship. These two principles, as they were thought to answer the apostles', would fully answer our design."

"How soon did the christian church cease to be itself; and the early vigor of primitive christianity degenerate into insipid spiritless formality, when once it became contentious! It broke into parties, sects multiplied, animosities grew high, and the grieved spirit of love retired from it!"*

We would here invite your attention to some excellent remarks of those eminently learned and orthodox divines, Stillingfleet and Taylor, upon the duty of churches as to christian communion, which will lead us directly to the next topic under consideration, the principles which ought to govern them in the admission of members.

"What charter," says bishop Stillingfleet, "hath Christ given the church to bind men up to, more than himself hath done? or to exclude those from her society who may be admitted into heaven? Will Christ ever thank men at the great day for keeping such out from communion with his church? The grand commission the apostles were sent out with, was only *to teach what Christ had commanded them*. Not the least intimation of any power given them to impose or require any thing beyond what himself had spoken, or they were directed to by the immediate guidance of the spirit of God."†

"As for particular churches," says bishop Taylor, "they are bound to allow communion to all those that profess the same faith upon which the apostles did give communion. To make the way to heaven straighter than God made it, or to deny to communicate with those whom God will vouchsafe to be united, and to refuse our charity to those who have the same faith, because they have not all our opinions, and believe not every thing necessary which we overvalue, is impious and schismatical; it infers tyranny on one part, and persuades and tempts to uncharitableness and animosities on both."

* Discourse on Union among Protestants.

† Irenicum.

“ Few churches that have framed bodies of confession, and articles, will endure any person that is not of the same confession ; which is a plain demonstration that such bodies of confession and articles do much hurt, by becoming instruments of separating and dividing communions, and making unnecessary or uncertain propositions a certain means of schism and disunion.”*

Thus we are guided to the principles which determine the duty of churches in respect to the admission of members. All christians belonging to the same place where a particular church is formed, or, as we might now say, to the same assembly or congregation of worshippers, have a right to participate in the ordinances and all the privileges of the gospel, “ upon professing the same faith on which the apostles did give communion.” Nothing more in the way of doctrines to be believed, or experiences to be related, than Christ and his apostles made necessary, can now be lawfully required as a condition of christian communion. These principles seem to result from the very nature and design of a christian church, which is not a mere voluntary society, empowered to establish whatever laws it may choose, but a community which, though voluntarily formed, and having a discretionary power as to things merely circumstantial, is subject to the authority and laws of Christ only, and has no right to make rules and regulations, which vary his terms of communion, or in any respect abridge the privileges granted by him to his disciples and followers.

All true churches, therefore, rest upon the same foundation, and are subject to the same divine authority in administering and dispensing the ordinances and benefits of the gospel. How widely, then, must those churches depart from the line of their duty, which require an assent to their human creeds, containing abstruse, perhaps incomprehensible, articles of faith and doctrine, as a necessary condition of communion ; more especially, if they hold their members to continued adherence to such articles, when by further light from God’s word they may feel bound to reject them ! Is not this making their own articles paramount

* Liberty of Prophesying.

to the scriptures, and themselves masters, claiming that very allegiance from the consciences of their brethren which is due to Christ alone, who "is the head of the body, the church," and in all things to "have the pre-eminence?"

The principles which we have here stated, you will find to be fully sustained by the old standard orthodox writers on church government, who yet could not be expected to view the subject in all its primitive simplicity.

Dr. Owen, who was called by one of the old American divines, "the Atlas of Congregationalism," says, "No warrant from the light of nature, or from the laws of men, or their own voluntary confederation, can enable any to constitute a church society, unless they do all things expressly in obedience unto the authority of Christ; for his church is his kingdom, his house, which none can constitute or build but himself. Wherefore it is necessary that the power of admission into, and exclusion from the church, doth arise from his grant and institution."

"The power of rule in the church, then, is nothing but a *right to yield obedience* unto the commands of Christ."*

The celebrated John Cotton, who stood at the head of the early divines of Massachusetts, in his "Doctrine of a Church and its Government," says, "It is not in the hand of the church to make laws or ordinances, to choose officers or members, to administer sacraments or ordinances, or any part of worship or government, of their own heads, but to receive all as from the hand of Christ, and to dispense all according to the will of Christ, revealed in his word."†

Thomas Hooker, another of the learned fathers of New-England, in his "Survey of Church Discipline," says, "Christ, the king of his church, and master of his house, he only in reason can make laws that are authentic for the government thereof.—It is not left in the power of persons, officers, churches, nor all states in the world, to add or diminish or alter any thing in the least measure."‡

* True Nature of a Gospel Church, &c. p. 199.

† p. 9.

‡ p. 5.

“ Christ himself, the institutor and maker of his church,” says Baxter, “ hath made the terms of essential catholic union ; and we have nothing to do herein but to find out what are the terms that he hath made, and not to inquire what any men since have made or added, as being not authorized thereto.”*

“ The church of Christ,” says the learned Dr. Gale, “ is that which is founded according to the direction and model by him laid down ; that, therefore, which is not so founded, but upon principles and regulations laid down by men, is not a church of Christ, but of men. To pretend to constitute a church by mutual agreement, as some have done, upon any principles which are not in scripture made and declared to be of the foundation of a christian church, and to receive and exclude members according as they conform to the foundation the church is built upon, is no other than setting up an illegal judicature, and judging the members of Christ’s body without any just authority.”†

We might refer to many others who maintain the same principles, but shall content ourselves with a single quotation from the works of bishop Warburton, who having stated that “ the terms of salvation, as they are delivered in the gospel, are faith in Christ, and repentance towards God,” proceeds to observe, that “ to change the fundamental laws of Christ’s spiritual kingdom, where he is the only lawgiver, is an offence of the highest nature; as not only implying simple disobedience, but usurpation likewise. A church acting with this spirit, not only throws off subjection, but assumes the sovereignty.”‡

Let us now inquire what were the terms, or professions of faith, upon which Christ and his apostles received those who would become his followers and members of his church. This can be ascertained only from the scriptures of the New Testament. And what are the creeds and confessions of faith which we find there ? What was that which drew from our Lord the solemn declaration to Peter, as to the foundation of his church ? This

* Works v. 4, 650.

† Gale’s Sermons, 3, 153.

‡ Works, 4to ed. 5 v. 173.

only, "Thou art the Christ, the son of the living God." What said Martha, in answer to our Lord's question, "Believest thou this?" "Yea, Lord, I believe that thou art the Christ, the son of God, which should come into the world." What was the faith declared by John in his gospel, as the end for which the miracles of our blessed saviour were wrought? "These are written that ye might believe that Jesus is the son of God, and that believing ye might have life through his name." What was the sum of Peter's first preaching, upon which were added to the church about three thousand souls? "Therefore, let all the house of Israel know assuredly that God hath made that same Jesus, whom ye have crucified, both Lord and Christ." What was the profession upon which Philip baptized the Eunuch? "I believe that Jesus Christ is the son of God." And what was the faith upon which Paul promised salvation? "If thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and believe in thy heart that God raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved." What says the beloved disciple of our Lord? "Whosoever believeth that Jesus is the Christ, is born of God." And again, "Whosoever shall confess that Jesus is the son of God, God dwelleth in him and he in God." "To us, says the great apostle of the gentiles, there is but one God, the Father, of whom are all things, and we in him; and one Lord, Jesus Christ, by whom are all things, and we by him."

Such are the true scripture creeds. Such were the terms upon which the apostles received men to communion, as members of Christ's church, subjects of his kingdom, and entitled to all the privileges of the gospel dispensation for attaining eternal life through faith and repentance. Such, too, for some time after the apostles' days, continued to be the terms of admission into Christ's church. "Whoever through the powerful operation of divine truth, had been brought to profess a faith in Christ as the saviour of the human race, although they might in other respects be uninformed, and various errors might still remain to be rooted out of their minds, were yet baptized, and admitted into the fellowship of Christ's kingdom."*

* Mosheim's Commentaries by Vidal, 1, 242.

"If," says bishop Taylor, "we have found out what foundation Christ and his apostles did lay, that is, what body and system of articles simply necessary they taught and required of us to believe, we need not, we cannot enlarge that system or collection.—The articles of necessary belief to all, (which are the only foundation,) they cannot be several in several ages and to several persons."*

It was by departing from this foundation principle, and imposing upon christians other and abstruser articles of belief than those required in the gospel, that the system of ecclesiastical tyranny commenced, which became intolerable under the Roman pontiffs, and roused the spirit of Luther and others, who assailed it with the bible and their own reason as their mighty weapons. Appealing to the pure word of God, as their only guide in matters of faith, and asserting the right to the free exercise of their judgment in ascertaining its meaning for themselves, their arguments were irresistible. Had all these reformers and their followers remained constant to their first principles, we might have seen the church restored to the purity and simplicity of its primitive days. But some of those who were most resolute in breaking from the papal tyranny, brought away their chains to fasten them upon their brother reformers, who would not stop in the career of improvement precisely where they judged proper. Hence succeeded, among the half reformed churches themselves, fresh impositions, persecutions, and struggles.

Should not these lamentable delusions teach all such half-reformed churches the value of christian liberty, and the importance of returning to the gospel terms of communion? Much may be found in the conduct and sentiments of our puritan ancestors to animate those churches of the present day which most need reformation, thus to retrace their steps. The puritan fathers nobly contended against the impositions of the English hierarchy with the same weapons, which had been successfully wielded against the tyranny of the Romish church. The age

* Liberty of Prophesying.

was not sufficiently enlightened, indeed, on the subject of liberty and toleration to prevent occasional lapses into a spirit of popery, among these intrepid asserters of the rights of conscience. But in general, the example of the puritans, as to the imposition of unauthorized creeds, both in England, and after their settlement in this country, appears to eminent advantage, compared with that of some of their more privileged descendants. In their contests with the episcopal church, they urged the duty of advancing the reformation to perfection, conforming the church to scripture rule, and bringing it back to apostolical purity in doctrine, discipline, and worship. They considered the christian church, not as a society which could form itself after whatever model, and make whatever laws it should please, but a community, whose constitution and laws were already formed by Christ, its sole king and lawgiver. These principles they continued to maintain, after their separation from the English church, in the gathering and formation of their own churches. Their confessions and covenants were, for the most part, simple and practical, and generally contained the principle, not only that the word of God was to be regarded as a perfect rule of faith, but that further light and instruction were to be sought and received from it.

Before their separation from the established church, some associations were formed among the puritan clergy, for promoting "the study of the scriptures, in order to be more capable of instructing the people in christian knowledge." The historian of the puritans gives us the confession of faith, which the members of these "prophesyings," as they were called, signed at their admission. After stating that they believed "the word of God, contained in the Old and New Testaments, to be a perfect rule of faith and manners;" and that "they condemned as a tyrannous yoke, whatever men have set up of their own invention to make articles of faith, and binding men's consciences by their laws and institutes;" they conclude as follows: "And we content ourselves with the simplicity of this pure word of God, and doctrine thereof; a summary of which is in the apostles' creed; resolving to try and examine, and also to judge all other

doctrines whatsoever by this pure word, as by a certain rule and perfect touchstone. And to this word of God we humbly submit ourselves and all our doings, willing and ready to be judged, reformed, and further instructed thereby in all points of religion.”*

Such also was the noble spirit of Robinson, who, according to the historian just referred to, “first struck out the congregational form of church government;” and who, in parting with those of his congregation in Holland who were about transplanting themselves to America, solemnly charged them to be always ready to receive whatever further truth should be made known to them; “for I am verily persuaded the Lord hath more truth to break forth out of his holy word. For my part, I cannot sufficiently bewail the condition of the reformed churches, who are come to a period in religion, and will go at present no further than the instruments of their reformation. I beseech you to remember, it is an article of your church covenant, that you be ready to receive whatever truth shall be made known to you from the written word of God. But I must here withal exhort you to take heed what you receive as truth; examine it, consider it, and compare it with other scriptures of truth, before you receive it; for it is not possible the christian world should come so lately out of such antichristian darkness, and that perfection of knowledge should break forth at once.”†

The same spirit of christian liberty, which is here exhibited, actuated our forefathers, and breathes through the covenants adopted by the churches first gathered in Massachusetts as well as in that of Mr. Robinson’s church, settled in Plymouth. The famous Mr. Cotton, in his work before referred to, bears witness to this as well as the covenants themselves. “Nor do we,” says he, “pinch upon any godly man’s conscience in point of covenant, in case he be willing to profess his subjection to Christ in his church, according to the order of the gospel. Nor do we limit him to our own way of the order of the gospel, but as it shall be cleared and approved to his own conscience.”‡ The

* Neal’s Hist. of the Puritans, 1, 292. † Id. 2. 146. ‡ p. 60.

covenant adopted by the first church in Boston, after a short preamble stating their providential coming together, and being desirous to unite into one congregation or church under the Lord Jesus Christ, their head, simply engages them to walk in all their ways, "according to the rule of the gospel, and in all sincere conformity to his holy ordinances, and in mutual love and respect to each other, as God shall give us grace." The church in Charlestown, and various others, had the same simple covenant. That of the First Church in Salem was alike practical and free from all disputed dogmas in theology; besides containing some distinguishing principles which deserve particular notice. It engaged them to walk together in all the ways of God, "according as he is pleased to reveal himself to us in his blessed word of truth;" "to reject all contrary ways, canons, and constitutions of men;" and "to study the advancement of the gospel in all truth and peace." These principles were worthy of the truly protestant character of the founders of the First Church. Morton, in his New-England's Memorial, says furthermore of this covenant, what accords with the general statement of Mr. Cotton, that "it was acknowledged only as a direction pointing unto that faith and covenant contained in the holy scripture, and therefore no man was confined unto that form of words, but only to the substance, end, and scope of the matter contained therein." So that, liberal as this covenant was, none were required to receive it upon admission into the church, who chose to make their profession in their own words and manner. Thus liberal and consistently protestant has the First Church remained from its foundation to the present day.

You here see what were the truly protestant and christian principles of our puritan ancestors, in respect to freedom of inquiry and church communion. May not some of our churches be justly charged with a dereliction from these great principles? Is it not desirable that they should return to them and recover the foundation upon which the first churches of New England were built? Would not this redound to the honor of christianity and advance its cause and influence in the world? Together

with the consideration of these questions, we would recommend to you the sentiments and views of two eminent advocates of christian liberty, the one in behalf of protestants against the Romish church, the other of dissenters from the church of England.

“If,” says the incomparable Chillingworth, as archbishop Tillotson styles him, “all men would believe the scripture, and, freeing themselves from prejudice and passion, would endeavor to find the true sense of it, and live according to it, and require no more of others but to do so; nor denying their communion to any that do so; who doth not see, that as all necessary truths are plainly and evidently set down in scripture, there would of necessity be among all men, in all things necessary, unity of communion, and charity, and mutual toleration.—This presumptuous imposing of the senses of men upon the words of God, the special senses of men upon the general words of God, and laying them upon men’s consciences together. This vain conceit that we can speak of the things of God, better than in the words of God; this deifying our own interpretations and enforcing them upon others; this restraining of the word of God from that latitude and generality, and the understandings of men from that liberty, wherein Christ and the apostles left them, is, and hath been, the only fountain of all the schisms of the church, and that which makes them immortal.”*

Dr. Chandler, the able defender of the truth of christianity, as well as of religious liberty, speaks as follows: “In matters of religion, I own no human authority. In these I submit only to the most high God. Him only I call and reverence as the father of my faith. I have but one Lord, even Christ. I acknowledge no divinely authorized and inspired teachers, but the apostles; nor will yield my conscience or judgment to be determined by the dictates of any mortal men. The scriptures I receive as a divine revelation. By these I humbly endeavor to form my own sentiments of christianity. All who receive these as the rule of their faith, and live by them as the rule of

* Works, fol. ed. 131.

their morals, I own so far as the sound members of Christ's body ; I embrace them as my brethren, I will gladly communicate with them, and I will never debar them from my communion. And this I declare, without exception of any denomination or party of christians whatsoever, or whatever be the external disadvantages they are under, or opprobrious names that are given them. Hard names and party reproaches terrify me not. Without this latitude of principle, I can see no possible end to the divisions of the church ; and if I should mark or avoid any christians who thus adhere to the only rule of christianity, I transgress this apostolical canon, and am myself chargeable with a schismatical and unchristian spirit."*

Will you not be animated by these noble sentiments to undertake an examination of this question ? An impartial attention to the view we have now taken, especially to the fact, that no creed more complex or abstruse, than those simple professions of faith which we have referred to, was ever made necessary by Christ or his apostles, on receiving believers into his church, could hardly fail to lead you to a correct judgment on the subject of christian communion. You could not, we think, avoid being brought to this conclusion, that all worshippers of God, in any congregation or society, where the christian ordinances are administered, who profess their faith in Jesus Christ, and desire to fulfil all their duties, and whose conduct is not inconsistent with their profession, have a right to the communion and participation of these ordinances, as well as all other privileges of the gospel, and that no church has authority under Christ to exclude them.

The same view points out the course, which a church ought to pursue in relation to those of its members, who may think it their duty to ask a recommendation to the communion of some other church. Various reasons, besides removal from the neighborhood of the church, may exist, to render this necessary and proper. New views of religious truth, whether on their part or that of their pastor, or an adherence on the part of the

* Case of Subscription, p. 39.

church to rules and practices, which appear to them unscriptural or oppressive, are among the causes which may prevent their edification in that church. Under such circumstances it becomes their duty to seek it elsewhere, for edification is the principal end of church communion ; and it must be their right and duty to judge for themselves where they may hope to find it. The church, of which they take leave, can have no responsibility as to their decision of this question, but only as to the truth of the recommendation required to be given ; and it is not called upon to recommend the church to which they may think it their duty to go. Whatever difference of opinion, therefore, may exist between them and their brethren, as to the doctrines of the church whose communion they prefer, they are alike entitled to the recommendation which their christian character deserves. This difference of opinion, indeed, is the very reason which justifies their removing from the church ; of course it cannot justify the church in attempting to prevent it by withholding what would otherwise be their acknowledged right.

“ If my own conscience,” says the learned and pious Matthew Henry, “ be not satisfied in the lawfulness of any terms of communion imposed, as far as I fall under that imposition, I may justify a separation from them and a joining with other churches, where I may be freed from that imposition.—Is not the life, and health, and salvation of my immortal soul dearer to me than any other concern ? Is not communion with God the sweetest and most precious of all my delights ? Is it not the life of my soul and the crown of all my joys ? And are not those administrations most desirable in which I find myself most edified ?”*

The several positions which we have now stated, are also sustained by the principles laid down in Dr. Owen’s work before cited, to whom we thus repeatedly appeal, because, standing at the head of the old calvinist divines, he must be regarded as of the highest orthodox authority. He explicitly states, that communion with particular churches is to be regulated absolutely by edification ; that no man can be obliged to abide in the commu-

* Henry’s Works. p. 664.

nion of any particular church any longer than it is for his edification, nor to forsake the conduct of himself in things divine and human, according to the light of his own conscience, by any engagement of blind obedience to others. "Whereas," says he, "the principal end of all particular churches is edification, there may be many just and sufficient reasons why a person may remove himself from the constant communion of one church unto that of another. And of these reasons he himself is judge, on whom it is incumbent to take care of his own edification above all other things. Nor ought the church to deny unto any such persons their liberty desired peaceably and according unto order."*

We have now finished what we proposed to say upon the duty of particular churches, in the several respects most nearly connected with our main subject, and have endeavored to confine ourselves to such views as appeared best calculated to lead you to reconsider your vote respecting Mrs. Baker's application, and to return to the ancient practice in such cases, and to the true principles of gospel liberty.

Here arises a natural inquiry, why these principles, sustained and recommended, as we have seen, by the most learned and venerated protestant writers, and by the alarming consequences of ecclesiastical usurpation, should not have become more completely established in the churches of this land of boasted light and liberty. There might be various causes assigned for this, which we shall not undertake to enumerate; but there is one source of error and delusion on this subject, to which we would call your particular attention.

Mistaken ideas attached to certain scripture terms, of which heresy and schism are perhaps the most remarkable, appear to us to be among the principal obstacles to the progress of christian truth and liberty. The distortion of these terms from their true scriptural meaning, has led many pious christians to visit with all the persecution in their power to inflict, the sincere and even laudable opinions of other christians equally pious as them-

* True Nature of a Gospel Church, &c. p. 225.

selves, believing perhaps that they were thus doing God service, while they were committing the very offence which they intended to punish. It cannot then be unseasonable here to inquire particularly into the true import of the words heresy and schism, as used in scripture, which, in the judgment of the most learned of all denominations, are now considered as having no reference to the mere belief and profession of conscientious opinions, or a peaceable separation from any particular church communion, but to perversities of the will, and actions tending to strife and divisions in the church. As the subject is important, and as we shall endeavor to give you briefly the results of the investigations of learned commentators and biblical writers, we hope the inquiry will not be tedious to you.

The excellent Dr. Campbell, a Scotch divine, and Principal of Aberdeen College, in the dissertations prefixed to his translation of the Four Gospels, has critically and fully examined the scriptural meaning of schism and heresy. As to the first, he observes, that though in the original Greek the word frequently occurs in the New Testament, it has but once been rendered 'schism' by our translators, yet its frequent "use among theologians has made it a kind of technical term in relation to ecclesiastical matters, and the way it has been bandied, as a term of ignominy, from sect to sect reciprocally, makes it a matter of some consequence to ascertain the genuine meaning it bears in holy writ."

Speaking of Saint Paul's use of this term, in his first epistle to the Corinthians, Dr. Campbell says, "in order to obtain a proper idea of what is meant by a breach or schism in this application, we must form a just notion of that which constituted the union whereof the schism was a violation. Now the great and powerful cement, which united the souls of christians, was their mutual love. This had been declared by their master to be the distinguishing badge of their profession.—As this, therefore, is the great criterion of the christian character, and the foundation of the christian unity, whatever alienates the affections of christians from one another, is manifestly subversive of both, and may consequently, with the greatest truth and energy, be denominated schism."

Having observed "of those differences among the Corinthians, to which Paul affixes the name 'schisms' or divisions," that they had "not the least relation to the doctrines of religion, or to any opinions that might be formed concerning them," Dr. Campbell proceeds, "the fault which the apostle stigmatized with that odious appellation, consisted, then, solely in an undue attachment to particular persons, under whom, as chiefs or leaders, the people severally ranked themselves, and thus, without making separate communions, formed distinctions among themselves, to the manifest prejudice of the common bond of charity, classing themselves under different heads. 'Now this, I say, adds the apostle, that every one of you saith, I am of Paul, and I of Apollos, and I of Cephas, and I of Christ.'"

After remarking upon the little importance attached by the apostle to "the differences among the Roman converts concerning the observance of days and the distinction of meats, which we should think more material as they more nearly affect the justness of religious sentiments," while "he is greatly alarmed at the differences among the Corinthians," Dr. Campbell observes, that "it was not without reason that the apostle made this distinction. The hurt threatened by the latter was directly against that extensive love commanded by the christian law; but not less truly, though more indirectly, against the christian doctrine and manners. By attaching themselves strongly to human, and consequently fallible, teachers and guides, they weakened the tie which bound them to the only divine guide and teacher, the Messiah, and therefore to that also which bound them all one to another." Having spoken of the consequences and probable cause of these differences among the Corinthians, Dr. Campbell adds, "Thus it is incontrovertible, in the first place, that the accusation imports that the Corinthians, by their conduct, had given a wound to charity, and not that they had made any deviation from the faith; and, in the second place, that, in the apostolical acceptation of the word, men may be schismatics, or guilty of schism, by such an alienation of affection from their brethren as violates the internal union subsisting in the hearts of christians, though there be

neither error in doctrine, nor separation from communion, and consequently no violation of external unity in ceremonies and worship." Dr. Campbell, in concluding his remarks on this topic, observes that "in after times separation from communion in religious offices was made the distinguishing badge of schism, insomuch that schismatic and separatist have been accounted synonymous, so that 'schism,' in scripture use, is one thing, and 'schism,' in ecclesiastical use, is another thing."

In the same clear and impartial manner, this accomplished divine settles the question as to the scriptural use of the term 'heresy.' "The original Greek word," he observes, "was nearly equivalent in its meaning to the English words 'class,' 'party,' 'sect,' and in its earliest acceptation conveyed in itself no reproach, since it was indifferently used either of a party approved, or of one disapproved by the writer. In this way it occurs several times in the Acts of the Apostles, where it is always, one single passage excepted, rendered 'sect.' And in this passage, the fourteenth verse of the twenty-fourth chapter, it ought, he thinks, to have been rendered sect, as it is in the fifth verse; at least it should have been translated the same in both places; for, as it is, being rendered 'heresy' in the apostle's reply, and 'sect' in the charge brought against him, he seems to defend himself against that of which he is not accused. "In my judgment the latter term is the only proper one; for the word heresy, in the modern acceptation, never suits the import of the original word, as used in scripture."

"This word, in the epistles of Peter and Paul, the only apostles who employ it, denotes something faulty and even criminal, as they address themselves only to christians, and are not speaking of sects without the church, but either reprehending them for, or warning them against, forming sects among themselves, to the prejudice of charity, to the production of much mischief within their community, and of great scandal to the unconverted world without.—But even here it has no necessary reference to doctrine, true or false.—Its immediate connection is with division or dissension, as it is thereby that sects or parties are formed."

“As far down, indeed, as the fifth century, and even lower, error alone, however gross, was not considered sufficient to warrant the charge of heresy. Malignity, or perverseness of disposition, was held essential to this crime.” But at length it became usual to stigmatize as heresy any opinion maintained against the doctrine of the church. “Thus mere mistake is made to incur the reproach originally levelled against an aspiring factious temper, which would sacrifice the dearest interests of society to its own ambition.”

Dr. Campbell concludes his observations on the words schism and heresy, as follows : “How much soever of a schismatical or heretical spirit, in the apostolic sense of the terms, may have contributed to the formation of the different sects into which the christian world is at present divided ; no person who, in the spirit of candor and charity, adheres to that which, to the best of his judgment, is right, though, in this opinion, he should be mistaken, is, in the scriptural sense, either schismatical or heretic ; and that he, on the contrary, whatever sect he belong to, is more entitled to these odious appellations, who is most apt to throw the imputation upon others. Both terms, for they denote only different degrees of the same bad quality, always indicate a disposition and practice unfriendly to peace, harmony, and love.”

Though Dr. Campbell has placed this subject in so full and clear a light, it may be interesting to see how far his views are sustained by other distinguished divines and commentators. We shall therefore present you with some very brief extracts from the writings of a few authors of this description.

“That is schism,” says the learned commentator Matthew Henry, “which breaks or slackens the bond by which the members are knit together. Now, that bond is not an act of uniformity in point of communion in the same modes and ceremonies, but true love and charity in point of affection. It is charity which is the ‘bond of perfectness ;’ it is ‘the unity of the spirit ;’ which is ‘the bond of peace ;’ and schism is that which breaks this bond.”*

* Works, p. 663.

Dr. Benson observes, in his note on Titus, that the Greek word translated 'heresy,' "does not with the ancients signify doctrine, but a sect or party. It is usually rendered 'sect,' in our common translation. 'Schism,' is a rent, a groundless faction or division among members of the same congregation; 'heresy,' has its foundation in schism. A heresy is a sect, faction, or party; or the persons of which that party consists."

"Those," adds Dr. Benson, "who to the best of their judgment take Christ for their guide in religious matters, though such men may perhaps mistake the meaning of several texts, or judge wrong in points of doctrine, and though others may perhaps exclude them from their communion, yet they constitute a true church of Christ, though few in number; and those who oppose them and renounce communion with them are the heretics, how numerous so ever they may be, and how great so ever their worldly power."

Dr. Macknight, in his commentary upon the second epistle of Peter, observes that "the word translated 'heresy,' is used by Peter to signify opinions known to be false, taken up to gratify pride, ambition, covetousness, lust, or other evil passions. Hence Paul tells Titus that an heretic is 'self condemned;' which he could not be, if heresy were merely an error of judgment. Being, therefore, an error of the will, it is ranked among the works of the flesh."

The famous Wesley, founder of the Methodists, says that schism in scripture means "not a separation from the church, but uncharitable divisions in it. The indulging any unkind temper towards our fellow christians, is the true scriptural schism.—So wonderfully," adds he, "have later ages distorted the words 'heresy' and 'schism' from their scriptural meaning. Heresy is not in all the bible taken for an error in fundamentals, or in any thing else. Therefore, both heresy and schism, in the modern sense of the words, are sins that the scripture knows nothing of."*

"The persons," says the learned Grove, "against whom the christians in the time of the apostles, are warned to be on

* Works, vol. 10, p. 238

their guard, were men of a very bad character, no real friends to Christ or his religion. But what is this to our receiving persons that manifest the greatest regard to the name and authority of Christ, believing his doctrine as far as they are able to apprehend it, obeying his laws, and kindly affectioned to all his members? Whatsoever errors such men may entertain, they can never be in the number of those heretics whom the apostle would have Titus to reject.”*

“The spirit of truth,” says the celebrated John Newton, “produces unity. The spirit of division is heresy. And the man who fiercely stickles for opinions of his own, who acts contrary to the peaceable, forbearing, humble spirit of the gospel, who affects to form a party, and to be thought considerable in it, is so far a heretic.”†

Chillingworth, in the preface to his works, declares that “he who believes the scripture sincerely, and endeavors to believe it in the true sense, cannot possibly be a heretic.”

Milton, in his ‘Treatise on Civil Power in Ecclesiastical Causes,’ says, “Seeing that no man, no synod, no session of men, though called the church, can judge definitely the sense of scripture to another man’s conscience, which is well known to be a general maxim of the protestant religion, it follows plainly, that he who holds in religion that belief, or those opinions, which to his conscience and utmost understanding appear with most evidence or probability in the scripture, though to others he seem erroneous, can no more be justly censured for a heretic than his censurers, who do but the same thing themselves, while they censure him for so doing. For ask them, or any protestant, which hath most authority, the church or the scripture? They will answer, doubtless, that the scripture; and what hath most authority, that no doubt but they will confess is to be followed. He, then, who to his best apprehension follows the scripture, though against any point of doctrine by the whole church received, is not the heretic, but he who follows the church against his conscience and persuasion, grounded on scripture.”

* Works, vol. 8, p. 183.

† Works, vol. 3, p. 175.

Bishop Taylor has many excellent remarks on this subject, in his work before referred to. "Heresy," says he, "is not an error of the understanding, but an error of the will.—If a man mingles not a vice with his opinion, if he be innocent in his life, though deceived in his doctrine, his error is his misery, not his crime.—It is inconsistent with God's goodness to condemn those who err where the error hath nothing of the will in it, who therefore cannot repent of their error, because they believe it true.—A good man that believes what according to his light, and upon the use of his moral industry he thinks true, whether he hits upon the right or not, because he hath a mind desirous of truth, and prepared to believe every truth, is therefore acceptable to God.—The name 'heretic' is made a bugbear to affright people from their belief, or to discountenance the persons of men, and disrepute them, that their schools may be empty and their disciples few."

Very similar to this last remark is the observation, with which the "ever memorable Hales," so called for his singular piety and learning, introduces his Tract on Schism. "Heresy and schism," says he, "as they are in common use, are two theological scarecrows, which they, who uphold a party in religion, use to fright away such, as making inquiry into it, are ready to relinquish and oppose it, if it appear either erroneous or suspicious."

"It hath been the common disease of christians from the beginning," he adds, "not to content themselves with that measure of faith, which God and the scriptures have expressly afforded us; but out of a vain desire to know more than is revealed, they have attempted to discuss things, of which we can have no light, neither from reason nor revelation. Neither have they rested here, but upon pretence of church authority, which is none, or tradition, which for the most part is but figment; they have peremptorily concluded, and confidently imposed upon others, a necessity of entertaining conclusions of that nature; and to strengthen themselves, have broken out into divisions and factions, opposing man to man, synod to synod, till the peace of the church vanished, without all possibility of recall."*

* Works, vol. 1, p. 125.

Archbishop Tillotson, after speaking of faction in religion—an unpeaceable and uncharitable zeal about things wherein religion doth not at all or very little consist—a temper utterly inconsistent with “humility, love, peace, meekness, and forbearance towards those who differ from us;” after mentioning also its effects in taking “men off from the more necessary parts of religion”—that they become “so zealous about small things that they neglect the weightier matters of the law, judgment, mercy and faith, and the love of God—spend so much of their time and heat about things doubtful, that they have no leisure to mind the things that are necessary—are so concerned about little speculative opinions in religion, which they always call fundamental articles of faith, that the practice of religion is almost wholly neglected by them—are so taken up in spying out and censuring error and heresy in others, that they never think of curing those vices and passions, which so visibly reign in themselves;” having thus spoken, he exclaims, “Deluded people ! who do not consider that the greatest heresy in the world is a wicked life, because it is so directly and fundamentally opposite to the whole design of the christian faith and religion ; and who do not consider that God will sooner forgive a man a hundred defects of his understanding, than one fault of his will.”*

So also Archbishop Sharp declares that “none but a wicked person” can be a heretic. “He is not a heretic,” says this eminent prelate in his discourse on heresy, “however he may be mistaken in matters of religion, who holds to the foundation of the christian faith, and means honestly, and endeavors to inform himself as well as he can.—It is the want of honesty and virtue, it is vice and sin, it is pride or ambition, or envy or discontent ; it is the love of the world, and the desire of serving some secular interest ; these are the things that make an heretic.”

We shall close these brief extracts with the venerated names of Owen and Baxter, the one upon heresy, including also an admirable sentiment from Salvian, and the other upon schism, such schism as one church may be guilty of towards another ;

* Works, vol. 1, p. 316.

which will naturally lead us to the consideration of your vote in its direct reference to this church.

“No judge of heresy,” says Dr. Owen, “since the apostles’ days, but hath been obnoxious to error in that judgment; and those who have been forwardest to assume a judicature, and power of discerning between truth and error, so far as to have others regulated thereby, have erred most foully.—Ignorance of men’s invincible prejudices, of their convictions, strong persuasions, desires, aims, hopes, fears, inducements; sensibleness of our own infirmities, failings, misapprehensions, darkness, knowing but in part, should work in us a charitable opinion of poor erring creatures, who do it, perhaps, with as upright sincere hearts and affections as some enjoy truth.”

“How tender is Salvian in his judgment of the Arians! They are, says he, heretics but know it not; heretics to us, but not to themselves. Nay, they think themselves so catholic, that they judge us to be heretics. What they are to us, that we are to them. They err, but with a good mind; and for this cause God shows mercy towards them.”*

“It is a greater schism,” says Baxter, “when churches do not only separate from each other causelessly, but also *unchurch* each other, and endeavor to cut off each other from the church universal, by denying each other to be true churches of Christ.”†

Thus we clearly see that the guilt of heresy and schism, in the scriptural sense of the terms, consists in a violation of christian unity, peace, and charity, and never in mere errors of opinion. As terms of reproach for sincere opinions in religion, and a conscientious separation from the Romish communion, they were used by the papists as weapons of defence against all free inquiry into the doctrine or worship of their church. Should not protestants disdain the use of such weapons? They certainly would disdain it, if they understood their true nature; and would revolt from it with horror, did they but reflect that it brings upon themselves the very guilt, which they are so zealous to expose and condemn in others.

* Sermons and Tracts, p. 227.

† Works, vol. 1, p. 292.

We now proceed to the consideration of the subject of your vote, in Mrs. Baker's case, as it more immediately concerns this church. The reason which you assign for refusing her request to be recommended to us, is, because you "cannot consistently recognize any church as a sister church, which in your judgment rejects those doctrines that you feel bound to receive as the fundamental doctrines of christianity."

By the fundamental doctrines of christianity, you doubtless mean those doctrines which are essential to the nature and existence of christianity, without a belief of which none can be counted christians; and we probably owe it to your delicacy of phraseology, at the time of passing the vote, that you used the word "sister," instead of "christian," and did not expressly deny us the character of a christian church, which your charge seemed to imply. Your own construction of this charge, in your last communication to us, removes all doubt as to your present meaning.

In considering this vote, two leading inquiries are suggested by it; first, as to the charge which you allege against this church, and secondly, as to the principle which you assume upon the supposition of its truth.

In the first place, then, how do you form your judgment that this church rejects those doctrines, which you receive as fundamental? What are those doctrines? Have you ever ascertained and enumerated them? Where can an accurate and complete list of them be found? You give us no intimations as to what they are, or whether you have ever settled this question for yourselves. Yet if you are so confident that there are certain particular doctrines, which are fundamental and essential to be believed by all christians, as to feel authorized to charge us with rejecting them, it should seem to be of the highest importance, on your own account, to be able to know and to tell fully and precisely what they are. Unless you have it in your power to do this, how can you be satisfied that your own faith is sufficient to make you christians? For, should you fail of a belief in any one of these fundamental, essential doctrines, your faith would be as clearly insufficient, as if you failed in regard to the whole; oth-

erwise, they could not all be essential. Where then, we ask, are to be found enumerated all the particular doctrines, which, and which alone, are essentially necessary to be believed by every man, in order to his being a christian?

Without a distinct and complete list of your fundamental doctrines, in what manner do you form your judgment whether, and how far, this church rejects them; and how are we to comprehend the nature and extent of your judgment; what it includes, and whether it extends to all the doctrines which you receive as fundamental, or to a part only, and if to a part only, to what part? All about it is vague and uncertain. We look for satisfaction into the printed Articles and Covenant of your church; but we look in vain. Here we find no enumeration of particular doctrines, nor any distinction made between those which are, and those which are not fundamental. So far then from being prepared to judge us in respect to fundamental doctrines, your church, it seems, has not taken care to determine, for its own members, what particular doctrines are to be received as fundamental, all-important as this inquiry must be to them.

It may be said, indeed, that in the articles and covenant referred to, you declare your firm belief in the christian religion as revealed in the scriptures, and that such a belief, embracing all the doctrines of christianity, whether fundamental or not, makes it unnecessary to discriminate between them, or to ascertain precisely what are, and what are not fundamental. Be it so; we also have this firm belief, and hold all the doctrines embraced by it. On this ground, therefore, no difficulty could arise between us about fundamental doctrines. We should rejoice to find you resting upon this safe and solid ground; the ground which was taken by the First Church at its foundation, and which has been maintained with constancy to the present moment. Here we should meet as sister churches, and christian brethren, receiving the doctrines of christianity from the same divine source, and seeking alike for the truth under the guidance of conscience and by the light of our own minds, as God should enable us to understand the scriptures.

From this ground you must have departed, before you could

find occasion for any such charge as you have brought against this church. How has this happened? The same articles and covenant will show. In "declaring your firm belief of the christian religion, as revealed in the scriptures," you add, "and of such a view of it, substantially, as the Westminster catechism exhibits." Here, indeed, we cannot follow you. This, we think, is to view the scriptures through a dark and distorting medium. We had rather behold them in their own original and heavenly light.

But let us see whether the Westminster catechism, this additional guide of your faith, will lead us to a view of the fundamental doctrines, which you charge this church with rejecting. Here again all is vague and uncertain. Among the many profound and intricate propositions and articles of faith contained in the Westminster catechism, we cannot learn, which you receive as fundamental, or whether you receive any of them as fundamental, or otherwise, in the sense or in the terms in which they are expressed. For the framers of your church covenant thought it fit that you should be bound only to receive them "substantially;" forgetting, probably, that President Clap, the arbiter of orthodoxy in former days, ranked among the signs of heresy a disposition, "to consent to the substance of our catechism and confession, without rigorously insisting upon every article and doctrine in it." Be this as it may, if by this latitude of construction you are at liberty to regard nothing as of substance in them, but truth, this church could not refuse thus far to receive them, however it might insist upon regarding the scriptures alone as the proper authority for deciding what is christian truth, whether contained in those articles, or any other merely human writings.

Thus, you must perceive, we cannot learn, with any distinctness, what doctrines you adopt as fundamental, and still less what are the doctrines which you charge this church with having rejected. We receive, equally with you, the holy scriptures and all the doctrines, which they contain, and, as we humbly hope, endeavor to ascertain their true meaning, in the best manner we can. For this purpose, we would avail ourselves of all

the light to be obtained from the works as well as the word of God, from the instructions of human teachers, and the writings of learned and pious men ; rejecting nothing, not even the Westminster catechism, so far as it contains what is true and useful.

As a church we reject no system of doctrines, every member being at liberty to inquire and judge for himself ; so that even those who would go further than you do, and with President Clap adopt all the articles and doctrines of that catechism, might become members with us, without being called upon to receive or reject any thing in repugnance to their principles. They might, in any manner they should choose, make known their belief in those articles, but a profession of belief in them, or any humanly devised articles of faith, could not be required by us, consistently with that supreme regard which we feel bound to pay to the revealed will of God.

Herein appears to consist the main difference, upon this point, between your church and the First Church ; you require, as a necessary term of communion, a declaration of belief in “ such a view of the christian religion substantially, as the Westminster catechism exhibits,” while this church requires, in such a case, no act whatever, in relation to that catechism or any similar system of doctrines ; and this omission, we presume, is the evidence upon which you charge this church with having rejected those doctrines, which you feel bound to receive as the fundamental doctrines of christianity.

When we shall have more fully stated to you the reasons why we cannot, in any form, either yield or require assent to the articles of the Westminster catechism, or any human articles of faith, you will feel satisfied we trust, that the omission to do this furnishes no just evidence that we reject any of the christian doctrines. Had this church, indeed, no express form of a profession of faith and covenant, to be proposed on admission to christian communion, you would not be justified in drawing such an inference from the fact. You must be aware that it is not necessary, to constitute the character even of an orthodox church, that its covenant engagements should be in writing. It is expressly laid down in the Platform, which appears to be

your main authority, as well as by Dr. Owen and others, that a church may express these, "by their constant practice in coming together for the public worship of God, and by their religious subjection to the ordinances of God there."* Surely, then, nothing can be inferred, as to the doctrines of any church, from its not requiring subscription, or assent, to articles like those of the Westminster catechism.

Here we think it proper to remark, that we would not be understood as intimating that there are not now, probably, as important differences of opinion on religious subjects between the members of your church and the members of this, as there usually have been between their respective predecessors. We know, indeed, that among members of the same church different views will be entertained upon important points; still more must this be expected of those belonging to different churches, whose religious opinions have been formed under very different influences and associations. But is it not probable, that these differences of opinion appear to be much greater than they really are? We are all apt to confound actual belief with the manner of expressing or manifesting it, the internal assent of the mind with the external assent of words or forms; and, what is still more deceptive, we too often look at the opinions of those who differ from us, through the distorting medium of party names. Could we see, as with the eye of omniscience, each other's faith, as it really exists in the mind, and the various circumstances under which it has grown up, we should doubtless find, not only that the differences in our faith are less important than we had imagined, but that these, whatever they may be, call for the exercise of mutual charity and tenderness, rather than repulsive coldness, or bitter anathemas.

We would also remark that we are not so sanguine as to indulge the hope or expectation that your church, with its strong prepossessions and feelings respecting us, can think it agreeable or conducive to edification, to have an interchange of religious services, or to hold any confidential intercourse with this

* Platform of Church Discipline, ch. 4.

church ; but our hope and prayer is, that both churches may yet cultivate the genuine spirit of christian charity, study the things which make for peace, and endeavor not to think of ourselves more highly than we ought to think, but to think soberly, according as God has dealt to each the measure of faith. Under the influence of such a spirit, we should not be in danger of unchristian alienations, nor be led to apprehend that there is an insurmountable barrier between us, or a great gulf fixed, so that none who would, can pass from one to the other.

In proceeding to address you, through others, on the subject of human tests in religion, our difficulty is not in finding able and eloquent advocates of christian liberty among the authors whom you revere, and would therefore listen to with pleasure, but in selecting the most instructive from the great number of those who present themselves to our choice. The general view which we take of the subject may be presented in the words of the late learned and orthodox Adam Clarke. "In every question," he says, "which involves the eternal interests of man, the holy scriptures must be appealed to in union with reason, their great commentator. He who forms his creed or confession of faith without these, may believe any thing or nothing, as the cunning of others, or his own caprices, may dictate. Human creeds and confessions of faith have been often put in the place of the bible, to the disgrace of revelation and reason. Let those go away ; let these be retained, whatever be the consequence."*

In justifying this church, even to your satisfaction, for taking this ground, and wholly discarding human creeds as tests of christian faith or character, it will not be necessary to prove that the bible alone is the proper rule of faith to all christians. This, you know, has been done a thousand times, and will not now be questioned, however it may be disregarded. The bible, and the bible only, it is notorious, has all the requisites of a complete and perfect rule of christiun faith and practice. It has the authority of such a rule, even that of God himself ; it is consequently infallible, and worthy of our entire confidence ; it is

* Commentary on the New Testament, last page.

unchangeable, no power on earth can alter it ; it is universal, and accessible to all ; it is plain, and intelligible to all ; and it contains all things necessary to be known or believed in order to salvation, for it contains the whole of christianity. All, too, have the power to use this rule, who are endowed with reason, which, with the aid and direction of conscience, is to all a sufficient power.

These statements might be confirmed from the writings of orthodox divines ; but this is unnecessary, for it is well known that all christians profess to receive the bible as their only rule of faith ; even the papists claim only the power of interpreting it for others. It is more important, therefore, to direct your attention to such views as will show you how liable we are to follow the spirit of this papal practice, and make our own interpretations of scripture, or the articles of our own faith, a rule for others ; and that whenever we do this, we set aside the bible as the real and only rule, substitute human in the place of divine authority, violate the most sacred rights of private judgment, and become responsible for the multiplied evils of such a practice.

Dr. Gale, eminent among the English dissenters for his learning and piety, and who, as his biographer informs us, “ embraced with sincerity and faithfulness the doctrine of the trinity,” has a series of discourses on this subject,* all of which deserve your attention. We can only glance at some of the views presented by him. Speaking of all impositions upon conscience as being of the true spirit of popery, he says : “ How happy had it been for the christian world, if this spirit had been confined to the papists. Would to God that the worst of all their doctrines and practices had been truly as much abhorred by all protestants, as the name of popery has been ; then the reformation would not have been almost only nominal, and rested in transferring this unjust authority from one set of men to another.—Let us consider the great evil and wickedness of assuming or submitting to any other authority in religious matters but Christ alone ; for

* From Matth. xxiii. 8, 9, 10.

this is not at all less wicked than absurd.—For any to assume a power of directing the consciences of other men, not leaving them to the scriptures alone, is declaring the scriptures to be defective and insufficient for that purpose; and consequently that our Lord, who has left us only the scriptures, did not know what was sufficient and necessary for us, and has given us a law, the wants and defects of which were to be supplied by some of his own wiser disciples and followers.”

“They who take on them to direct the consciences of men, are not satisfied with a man’s admitting the words of scripture, and even that very sense of them, perhaps, which they require, unless he will also use and receive the very words they have chosen. It is not therefore, the words of scripture which our Lord has authorized, nor the sense which he has taught, but purely their own form of words, which they directly impose as more proper to express what our Lord intended, than those the scripture uses.—And to impose any particular forms of words, instead of those used in scripture, is no less than to set aside the scripture and its divine author, for these forms and interpretations and the authors and imposers of them.”

“I might in several other particulars, show the great wickedness they are guilty of, who take upon them to domineer over and prescribe to the consciences of men. They rob God of his just dominion, he alone having the rights they claim. They impeach his justice, in not acquainting us with the doctrines we ought to believe, and the laws we ought to observe. They set themselves up as more capable to exercise that dominion than God or Christ, and usurp that authority over others, which is expressly forbidden to be exercised by any christians, who have a strict charge not to lord it over God’s heritage. Therefore, all imposers on men’s consciences are guilty of rebellion against God and Christ. They make and require the reception of new articles of faith and practice; that is, they establish a new religion different from that which Christ taught, and preach another gospel.—I will only add, in order to show the wickedness of submitting and betraying our consciences to any such unjust usurped authority, that besides the guilt of countenancing

their illegal claim, and supporting their pretensions, we renounce subjection to the religion of Christ.—In every instance wherein we thus submit ourselves to the direction of any human authority, so far we set aside and renounce all other authority, our own light and reason, and even the word and declarations of God and Christ.”

“ If that by which we are to judge of the truth and regularity of a christian’s faith and practice is, as no doubt it is, to be properly called the rule of his faith and practice ; then those articles and forms required by any church to be received and believed are made thereby a rule of faith ; for they are intended to show and declare what all persons ought, and what the imposers expect they should believe.—Whether a person be right or wrong in the faith necessary to salvation, and duly qualified to become a member of a christian church, is to be tried and known by his embracing or rejecting those particular articles which are proposed to him.”

“ Let me prevail with you to consider this matter faithfully and impartially. If you draw up and agree upon any articles and forms of words, not expressed in scripture, is it not because, and don’t you thereby expressly declare, that the scriptures are no sufficient and proper rule in themselves, and that you judge your own articles and forms to be a sufficient, and even the most proper rule you know of, whereby to judge of other men’s opinions, and qualifications for church membership, and to regulate your christian communion ? Are not these articles proposed as the terms and conditions of admission into your church ? And what is this, but expressly to declare, that by this rule every one may judge what is necessary to be believed in order to church-membership ? To this rule, not to the scriptures, they must conform themselves, if they intend to be admitted into Christ’s church. All this, therefore, is no other, but to set up the church for judge and law-maker, and her decisions for the rule of faith.”

“ It is saying nothing here, to pretend that what is proposed and required is contained in scripture in substance, and only drawn out thence more distinctly and expressly ; and that,

therefore, not these, but the scriptures are made the true rule of faith. For though it should be supposed that the scriptures are the rule, from whence these interpretations and conclusions are drawn; yet not the scriptures, but these interpretations and conclusions only, are directly the prescribed rule; the scriptures being at least placed out of sight, and laid behind this thick curtain of human interpretations, which is drawn before that sacred rule, and effectually conceals it from our view and examination."

"If, as you pretend, you really mean that the scriptures only should be our rule; if we are to judge only by them of religious matters, what have we to do with these forms and human interpretations? Of what use are they? What can they mean? And why do we contend so bitterly and earnestly about them? There must be something at the bottom of all this; there must be a great stress laid upon these forms, which bears some proportion to the mischievous effects so visibly produced by them; and this can only be the making them the test and standard of truth and error, of orthodoxy of opinion, and regularity of practice. Hence arise those warm contests, those hatreds and heart-burnings, among the brethren of one common father, and the fellow-servants under one common master, which disgrace christianity, and render the professors of it miserable; when the same zeal for the words of scripture only, which are confessedly our rule, would soon heal all our breaches, remove animosities and dissensions, and settle the true christian spirit of love and charity amongst us."

"Away then with all human forms and compositions; with all decrees and determinations of councils and synods; with all confessions and subscriptions; with all interpretations and pretended scripture consequences: away with all the inventions, agreements, and declarations of men; and let every pious christian embrace and subscribe only that most valuable form of sound words contained in the scriptures, which are the word of God, and able to make men wise unto salvation."*

* Sermons, v. 1, p. 100.

In connexion with these views, we present you with some passages from the works of two other eminent trinitarian divines, very dissimilar, however, in some respects ; we allude to bishop Warburton, and the noble-minded Baxter, who might have been a bishop if he would. They both give us striking views of the absurdity and evil consequences of departing from the scripture rule of faith. "To claim rule or mastery in matters of religion," says Warburton, "on mere human authority, shows so much impudence ; and to acknowledge the claim, so egregious folly ; that one could hardly conceive any man, who had been 'delivered from the bondage of corruption, into the glorious liberty of the children of God,' should be in danger either of assuming it himself, or of submitting to it when assumed by others."

"But the government of God's church under the gospel, not being administered, as under the law, in person, but by a written rule ; the ministers of the word, under pretence of interpreting it, took occasion to introduce their own authority ; and on that, by insensible degrees, a very wicked usurpation. The business of interpreting was at first modestly assumed, as a mere act of charity, to assist the brethren in the study of God's word. The pretence for the exercise of this office was the obscurities in sacred scripture. Unhappily it was not understood, that the very obscurities themselves were a sufficient evidence that the subject of them could never be matter of faith necessary to salvation. What perhaps contributed to obstruct so obvious a truth was the great privileges ascribed to christian faith. So that men became more solicitous to have it large and full, than to have it pure and perfect."

"Call no man Father upon the earth, for one is your father who is in heaven ; neither be ye called masters, for one is your master even Christ. These words plainly imply, that whoever requires religious obedience, or a right over conscience, by his own authority, is a usurper in another's jurisdiction ; and whoever pays obedience to such a claim, is a rebel to his lawful master."

"But man's claim is not only unjust, and man's submission to it sinful ; but they are both in the highest degree extravagant and absurd. A jurisdiction in matters of faith is what no human

authority is capable of administering ; as all human authority is subject to error and mistake. This is so obvious an objection, that the bishop of Rome who first set up this claim, or at least digested it into a system, soon saw the necessity of supporting it on a pretended infallibility. And though this was adding blasphemy to usurpation, yet it made the mystery of ungodliness consistent ; and free, at least, from the absurdity of those who confess themselves fallible, and yet exact the same submission to their authority as if they could not err. Which of these is the most absurd is easily understood ; but which of them the most presuming, is hard to say : for if one intrenches upon heaven, the other ventures to insult common sense."

"One, therefore, is our Father, who is in heaven ; one is our master, even Christ. And their will, as announced to us in sacred scripture, is the only law to which christians, as such, are held and obliged. On this rock, where Christ built his church, every private man may safely repose his conscience. To this truly infallible guide, we may commit ourselves with perfect confidence ; in this assurance, that so much of God's will as is necessary for us to know, is easy to be known ; and that whatsoever is dark or difficult in his word, is therefore not necessary to be known."

The same great author, in another place, in explaining the manner in which christians have violated the unity of the spirit, and how they may restore it, says : "Instead of stopping at the few general and fundamental principles of christian faith, clearly delivered, and uniformly believed by all, they went on, and brought into the church, as terms of communion, abstruse questions relating to points obscurely delivered, and made still more doubtful by having the principles of the Greek philosophy, to which the sacred writers paid no regard, and with which the faith has no concern, applied to their solution. They did not consider, that the very obscurity itself sufficiently declared that they never were proposed by the gracious author of our faith, for fundamental articles ; nor consequently that he ever intended the profession of them as a necessary condition of church communion."

“Now the violation of the unity of the spirit having been occasioned by these mistakes, we may easily collect that the means of preserving it entire had been the requiring no more, as the terms of church communion, than what Christ has delivered to be explicitly believed; and these not consisting of many particulars, and all of them clear and simple, had afforded no handle for difference or diversity of opinions; especially had due care been taken to express, as much as possible, those points of communion, in scripture terms, without running out into modern glosses, conceived upon the principles of science and philosophy merely human.”

“But since, through a neglect of these rules, this unity of the spirit has been unhappily violated, the next question is of restoring it, which, what is here said concerning the means of its preservation, shows us is to be done, by retrenching all unnecessary articles, to which the animosity of parties, the superstition of barbarous ages, and even the negligence of time have given an imaginary importance, and by reducing the formula of faith to the primitive simplicity, leaving all disputable points, together with such other as no party deems necessary, to the free decision of every man’s private judgment.”*

Baxter, speaking of “the sin and danger of making too much necessary to church union and communion,” says: “Addition to Christ’s terms is very perilous as well as diminution; when men will deny either church entrance or communion to any that Christ would have received, because they come not up to certain terms which they, or such as they devise. And though they think that Christ giveth them power to do thus, or that reason or necessity justifieth them, their error will not make them guiltless. Imputing their error to Christ untruly is no small aggravation of the sin. Nor is it a small fault to usurp a power proper to Christ; to make themselves lawgivers to his church without any authority given them by him; their ministry is another work. And it is dangerous pride to think themselves great enough, wise enough, and good enough to come after

* Works, vol. 5, p. 144, 182.

Christ and to amend his work, and to do it better than he hath done.”*

“Though we would subscribe to the whole scripture, or any confession drawn up in its phrase and matter, yet this will not serve for union and communion. They tell us heretics will subscribe to the scriptures; and I tell them, that heretics may subscribe also to their confessions, and force a sense of their own upon them; and that God never left them to make better confessions, and fitter to discover heresies, than scripture doth afford.”

“The papists have set up whole volumes of councils and decrees for the rule forsooth, because the scripture is dark and all heretics plead scripture. And what have they done by it, but cause more darkness, and set the world and their own doctors too, in greater contentions.”

“Thus men lose themselves, and abuse the church, because God’s word will not serve their turn as a rule for us to unite upon. This is the one rule that God hath left, and men will needs blame this as insufficient, and mend God’s works by the devices of their addle brains, and then complain of divisions when they have made them!”

“The rule that all must agree in must be made by one that is above all, and whose authority is acknowledged by all.—Never will the church have full unity till the scripture sufficiency be more generally acknowledged. You complain of many opinions and ways, and many you will still have, till the one rule, the scripture, be the standard of our religion.”†

“Two things have set the church on fire, and been the plagues of it above one thousand years. 1. Enlarging our creed, and making more fundamentals than ever God made. 2. Composing, and so *imposing*, our creeds and confessions in our own words and phrases.”‡

In pursuing the subject, this fearless advocate of the authority and sufficiency of scripture, imputes the introduction and multiplication of human creeds among christians to the artifices of

* Works, vol. 4, 653. † Ib. 673. ‡ Ib. vol. 3. 76.

their great spiritual enemy ; who, as he proceeds to observe in the style of his day, “will needs be a spirit of zeal in the church ; and he will so overdo against heretics, that he persuades them they must enlarge their creed, and add this clause against one, and that against another, and all was but for the perfecting and preserving of the christian faith. And so he brings it to be a matter of so much wit to be a christian, as Erasmus complains, that ordinary heads were not able to reach it. He had got them with a religious zealous cruelty to their own and others’ souls, to lay all their salvation, and the peace of the church, upon some unsearchable mysteries about the trinity, which God either never revealed, or never clearly revealed, or never laid so great a stress upon ; yet he persuades them that there was scripture proof enough of these ; only the scripture spoke it but in the premises, or in darker terms, and they must but gather into their creed the consequences, and put it into plainer expressions, which heretics might not so easily corrupt, pervert, or evade. But what got he at this one game ?”

“He got a standing verdict against the perfection and sufficiency of scripture, and consequently against Christ, his spirit, his apostles, and the christian faith : that it will not afford so much as a creed or system of fundamentals, or points absolutely necessary to salvation and brotherly communion, in fit or tolerable phrases, but we must mend the language at least. He opened a gap for human additions, at which he might afterwards bring in more at his pleasure. He framed an engine for an infallible division, and to tear in pieces the church, casting out all as heretics that could not subscribe to his additions, and necessitating separation by all dissenters, to the world’s end, till the devil’s engine be overthrown. And hereby he lays a ground upon the divisions of christians, to bring men into doubt of all religion, as not knowing which is the right. And he lays the ground of certain heart-burnings, and mutual hatred, contentions, revilings and enmity.”*

This catalogue of public evils, still flowing from creed-making in the church, is sufficiently appalling, to say nothing of the

* Works, vol. 2, 896.

more horrible persecutions of former days ; but this is not all. There are other evils from the same source, which, though less obvious to the public eye, are of incalculable extent and severity, bringing distress of conscience and anguish of spirit to private christians, and spreading a baleful influence over their motives and characters.

Can you, upon reflection, doubt that wherever subscription or assent to a creed of man's making, has been established as a necessary condition of christian communion, especially if it embraced the deep and disputable points in theology, there may have been thousands of the humble, sincere, and pious followers of Christ, who have been debarred from the joy of testifying in the church their love and gratitude to him, because they could not in conscience submit to the imposition of such a creed ? And must you not believe that thousands of others, who in the unsuspecting period of youth, or under the influence of newly excited feelings of devotion and piety, have been led by implicit confidence in their spiritual guides to set their names to whatever was proposed to them as proper, have afterwards, upon examining their professed creed, been perplexed with difficulties in comprehending it, and agitated by doubts of its accordance with scripture ; or, if they escaped these evils, have incurred still greater, by attaching to their creed an authority which is due to the divine word alone, and enlisting themselves as partisans of a sect, exposed to all the baleful influence of a narrow, exclusive and uncharitable spirit. Baxter, deeply sensible of these evils, points out some of them in his *Directions for Young Christians*. "It is," he says, "a most dangerous thing to a young convert, to be ensnared in a sect ; it will, before you are aware, possess you with a feverish, sinful zeal for the opinions and interest of that sect ; it will make you bold in bitter invectives and censures against those who differ from them ; it will corrupt your church communion, and fill your very prayers with partiality and human passions ; it will secretly bring malice, under the name of zeal, into your mind and words ; in a word, it is a secret, but deadly enemy to christian love and peace."*

* Works, v. 1, p. 40.

With a full conviction of the evils attending the use of creeds and confessions of faith as terms of communion, as well as the absurdity of the practice, how could this church have taken other ground respecting them, than it ever has taken? And how could it now depart from its first foundation? "Other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ." And what is our inducement for departing from it? What is the great utility of such creeds and confessions? We can discern none. Their inutility, indeed, would of itself be a sufficient objection to them; though such an objection is hardly applicable, since in a case of so much delicacy and importance as undertaking to regulate the faith, or prescribe to the conscience of another, every act, which is not positively beneficial, must be positively evil, and not merely useless.

But let us inquire what are the benefits, which may be supposed to result from the use of creeds and confessions of faith in the church. Is it said that they are valuable as summaries of the christian faith and doctrine, presenting in a connected view the leading truths of the bible? If so, may they not serve every purpose as manuals of religious instruction, or helps to piety and devotion, without being used as tests of fitness for church communion? May not all enjoy the full benefit of them, without their being imposed upon the consciences of any? And was it not the original design of the framers of the Westminster confession and catechism, that they should be used for such legitimate purposes only?

The assembly of divines at Westminster, we are informed, did not make the confession of faith they drew up a legal standard of orthodoxy; nor till forty years after was subscription or assent to it required of any layman or minister as a term of christian communion. And when a motion was made in the assembly that the answers in the shorter catechism should be subscribed by all the members, the proposition was rejected as an unwarrantable imposition. Yet these men were far from having attained to just notions of religious freedom; as Milton says of them, "they taught compulsion without conviction, persuading the magistrate to use it, as a stronger means to sub-

due and bring in conscience than evangelical persuasion." Shall we then, who understand "the perfect law of liberty," so pervert the design of these theological compends, as to impose them as tests of faith upon all, upon the old and the young, the learned and the unlearned, before we admit them to our communion and allow them to give expression to their feelings of pious gratitude as believers in Christ; and thus require them to profess, what it is scarcely possible should be real, a belief in the abstruse and deep results of metaphysical divinity, which those profound theologians, who had spent years in working them out, could not be induced to subscribe to? This we could not do. To substitute such a test for the simple terms of the gospel would seem to us a daring usurpation of authority in Christ's kingdom, and a cruel infliction upon our fellow-servants under him.

But, to return, will it be said that requiring assent to these summaries of faith will have the good effect of promoting a belief in the great doctrines of our holy religion, a uniformity in "the faith once delivered to the saints?" So it may have been thought in other times, when christians supposed, or acted as if they supposed, that men could, at will, believe or not believe; when profession of faith was taken for faith itself, and when an outward formal assent to certain doctrines was considered of more value, than an internal conviction of the truth. This kind of delusion was natural enough in that church and among those with whom the bible was a sealed book, and who were not expected to form religious opinions, but to profess what were dictated to them by their spiritual guides. But among those who have opened the bible to all, and declared it to be the right and duty of all to examine the scriptures, and judge for themselves what are the truths revealed to us from heaven, it will not be pretended by any who have not relapsed from their protestant principles, that a real belief of christian doctrines can be attained in any other way, than by exercising one's own reason and judgment in understanding the evidence upon which they are founded. Consequently it must be admitted, that requiring a formal assent to certain doctrines cannot be the means of producing a real belief in them.

Thus it is uniformity of profession only, not of faith, which is to be expected from imposing upon all the same articles of religion. And of what value is this uniformity of profession? Can it serve to promote the life and reality of religion? May not these exist, in all their force and beauty, without it? Can they indeed, with it? Profession being but the show, and not the substance of religion, what but evil can result from extending it beyond the limits of real belief, including, perhaps, dark and abstruse points, which the humble professor never examined and could never comprehend? However this might lead him into self-delusion, or enable him to deceive others, it surely could bring no good to himself or others; it could not give him faith in the doctrines professed, nor any of its benefits, whatever these might be.

Such appears to be the utility of creeds and confessions as tests of orthodoxy, and terms of communion.

Baxter, somewhere in his works, compares those who would make all christians think alike to a certain wise statesman, who advised his sovereign to have all his subjects of the same stature, complexion, and disposition. And those who would require of all the same profession of belief in certain particular and intricate doctrines, in order to their admission into the church, appear to resemble any other such wise statesman, who should prescribe a military uniform of precisely the same size and form, which few could wear with comfort, and recommend that those, and those only, who would array themselves in it, should be embodied as soldiers. To say nothing of some who might be received, would not thousands of the bravest and most efficient men be excluded? So in the other case, without assuming the uniform profession, none can be received as members of the church. The most substantial virtues and graces of the christian character will not entitle them to admission; even should they be clad in "the whole armor of God, girt about with truth, have on the breastplate of righteousness, be shod with the preparation of the gospel of peace, and have taken the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the spirit, which is the word of God."

How far removed is such a practice from the simplicity that is

in Christ. What this simplicity is, as to the terms of christian communion, we have clearly seen from the scriptures. It cannot be uninteresting to you to see from the history of the early christians how faithfully they preserved it, and what were the consequences, in after times, of departing from it.

The beautiful and divine simplicity of the christian religion, says Dr. Mosheim, appears from the two great and fundamental principles upon which it is built, faith and charity ; and the only two rites of baptism and the holy supper, instituted by Christ himself. Of the early ages of the church he observes, that whoever acknowledged Christ as the saviour of mankind, and made a profession of confidence in him, was immediately baptized and received into the church. The christian system, as it was then taught, preserved its native simplicity, and was comprehended in a small number of articles. The great study of those who embraced the gospel was rather to express its divine influence in their dispositions and conduct, than to examine its doctrines with an excessive curiosity, or to explain them by the rules of human wisdom. As long as the sacred writings were the only rule of faith, religion preserved its native purity ; and in proportion as their decisions were neglected, or postponed to the inventions of men, it degenerated from its primitive and divine simplicity.

This representation, from the highest historical authority, accords with that of other distinguished writers. Robinson, in his ‘*Ecclesiastical Researches*,’ says, that in the churches of the earliest times, the doctrines taught were few, plain, and simple, taken immediately from the gospel.” Dr. Cave, in his ‘*Primitive Christianity*,’ observes of the christian fathers, that “their creed in the first ages was short and simple, their faith lying not so much in nice and numerous articles, as in a good and an holy life.” And Dr. Hammond, in speaking of the divisions and animosities among christians of more recent times, utters a prayer for the return of those happy primitive days, “wherein vice was the only heresy.”

The estimation in which christian liberty was held appears from the writings of the fathers themselves. As quoted

by Limborch, in his *History of the Inquisition*, Tertullian says : " Every one has a natural right and power to worship God according to his persuasion ; nor can it be a part of religion to compel men to religion, which ought to be voluntarily embraced, and not through constraint." Cyprian says : " Although there may be tares in the church, this ought to be no obstruction to our faith and charity ; nor is their being in the church any reason for our departure out of it ; it should be our care, that we be found the true wheat. The servant cannot be greater than his Lord ; nor should any one arrogate to himself what the Father hath committed to the Son only, to winnow and purge the flour, and separate by any human judgment the chaff from the wheat. When the disciples left the Lord himself, he did not reproach or grievously threaten them, but gently said, ' what, and will you forsake me also ? ' observing that sacred law, of every one's being left to his own liberty and will, and making for himself his own choice." Lactantius says : " There is nothing which should be more free than the choice of our religion, in which, if the consent of the worshipper be wanting, it becomes entirely void and ineffectual."

The earliest deviation from the gospel terms of communion, appears to have taken place when what is called the Apostles' Creed was introduced ; the articles of which were adopted at different periods of time, and which, as now formed, is the only confession of faith required in order to baptism and communion in the church of England, though a so much heavier burden is laid upon the consciences of its clergy. This most ancient of human creeds, compared with what followed it in the Romish church, and even with some creeds still existing in Congregational societies, seems scarcely objectionable, except as a precedent leading to further usurpations. In this view of the subject, no additions whatever to the scriptural rule of faith are to be justified. In point of principle, as Bishop Taylor truly observes, " it is like arbitrary power, which by the same rule it takes sixpence from the subject, may take a hundred pounds, then a thousand, then all." So in fact it happened with christian liberty. In the language of Dr. Chandler, " human creeds

were substituted in the room of scripture ; and according as circumstances differed, or new opinions were broached, so were the creeds corrected, amended and enlarged, till they became full of subtleties, contradictions and nonsense.”* And to all these implicit assent was required. Christians were thus by degrees not only stript of their liberties and rights of conscience, but reduced to the most deplorable state of slavery and spiritual darkness.

To restore the christian world to freedom, and to the light of God’s word, was the great object of the reformation ; and the avowed principles of the reformers, had they been faithfully pursued, would have led them to the accomplishment of this noble object. But as Robinson, the eminent puritan before referred to, deeply lamented, they had “ come so lately out of such thick antichristian darkness, that they could not see all things.” They could not attain to just and clear views of christian liberty, nor discern what would be the ultimate operation of the principles upon which they assailed the papal tyranny. Hence they were soon found acting in direct contradiction to their principles. Some of their friends and adherents could not bring themselves to renounce all attachment to the rites of their mother church ; and to conciliate these, many of the Romish ceremonies were retained in some of the reformed churches, thus leaving occasion for animosities and divisions in their own party ; while their enemies bitterly reproached them with the heresies and extravagancies springing up among their followers ; and in the vain hope of removing such an opprobrium, and producing uniformity of faith in the leading doctrines of religion, creeds and confessions were devised, and enforced in the same persecuting spirit which they had so justly condemned and resisted. “ Luther, Calvin, Cranmer, Knox, the founders of the reformed churches in their respective countries,” says the impartial historian of Charles the Fifth, “ as far as they had power and opportunity, inflicted the same punishments upon such as called in question any article in their creeds, which were denounced

* Introduction to Hist. of the Inquisition, p. 111.

against their own disciples by the church of Rome.”* What a memorial of human weakness! In the very act which gave to the reformers the name of protestants, and by which they resisted the edict requiring of them, among other things, to preach according to the sense and interpretation of scripture approved by the church, they boldly asserted their principles, declaring that they could not recede from the work of reformation, nor bind themselves from going further, “without denying the pure word of God, which they had espoused for their rule of faith and practice; and that since no doctrine could be more certain than that of God’s word, and that no doctrine should be taught besides it, the obscure places of scripture could not be better explained and illustrated, than by such passages as were clear and plain.” Yet these were the men to substitute their own interpretations for the decisions of God’s pure word, and to enforce them as doctrines not to be questioned. How much of humility, and meekness, and modesty in our religious pretensions, may we not learn from this single fact!

But in their intolerance, if not in their inconsistency, these reformers erred with the age in which they lived. To this apology, so far as it goes, they are fully entitled. The same impartial historian observes, that “toleration, under its present form, was repugnant to the ideas which all the different sects had adopted from mistaken conceptions concerning the nature of religion and the rights of truth, or which all of them had derived from the erroneous maxims established by the church of Rome.” Individuals, indeed, were found even in those times, who had just views of human creeds and of the nature and extent of the reformation in religion which was needed. One of these, whose merits have been little known, furnishes so remarkable an instance in proof of this, as well as of the persecuting spirit which then prevailed, that he deserves particular notice. We allude to Erasmus Johannes, teacher of a latin school at Antwerp, whose enlightened views and unmerited fate are mentioned in the History of the Reformation in the Low Countries. He published a work, proving how early christianity began to be

* Robertson’s Hist. Charles V. v. 4, p. 186.

corrupted, and maintaining that in order to a true and lasting reformation it was necessary to conform to the apostolical churches in doctrine and discipline ; and to that simplicity in expressing matters of religion, of which Christ and his apostles have left us an example. "What can we require more," said he, "of any body ? And if we do, by what authority is it ? Therefore, let every one make use of his christian liberty in this matter, and let him not hinder others. If any man thinks it necessary to use new terms in order to declare his notions and belief about divine matters, insomuch that the words of the prophets and apostles cannot serve him, it is most certain, that not only the words are new, but also his doctrine and religion too ; otherwise it would not be possible for him to fail of good and apposite expressions in holy writ."*

But these principles of reformation were too far in advance of the age, and the author of them, who deserved a crown, was obliged to flee his country. Even now, perhaps, there are many who would be slow to receive them ; but they may be safely promulgated. Persecution, in every form and degree, is reprobated and disclaimed by all the various sects in christendom. The principles upon which the protestant faith is established, and the rights of conscience and free inquiry maintained, have been so fully developed in their effects and influences, that as few could now be found to call them in question, as there once were to vindicate them. All denominations unite in professions of attachment to them ; all agree that upon the free operation of these principles depend our hopes of farther advancement in christian truth, liberty and peace. What apology, then, could there be for us, if, in such times, we should copy the errors of the early reformers instead of following out their principles, and make subscription or assent to certain human explications of scripture an indispensable condition to the enjoyment of privileges, which all the disciples and followers of Christ are entitled to without it ; and thus, "as far as we have power and opportunity," domineer over the consciences of our

* Brandt's Hist. of the Reformation, v. 1, p. 399.

brethren? What might not be our condemnation, if we should go back to those very times of persecution, and almost anti-christian darkness, for a system of such explications, drawn out in the heat of party contentions, "by men who comparatively understood little of the doctrinal parts of religion, and were quite unacquainted with the rights of conscience."* Would not this, in the language of Dr. Jortin, be indeed admitting that "an assembly of fallible men may determine concerning all points of faith and practice for themselves, and for their heirs; and entail bondage and darkness, worse than Egyptian, upon their posterity forever?"† We could not justify ourselves in such a proceeding. It would, in our view, be not only resisting the progress and principles of the reformation, but returning, as far as we could, to that spirit of Romish tyranny and delusion, from which it was the object of the reformation to rescue the christian world.

As we earnestly desire to lead you to the same convictions of duty on this subject which we so strongly feel, as well as to the persuasion and acknowledgment that we are sincere in them; you will indulge us in pursuing the consideration of human tests in religion a little farther, and submitting to you the thoughts of some other authors of high reputation, who have taken views of the subject somewhat different from those already contemplated. Dr. Hartley, distinguished alike for his deep piety and learning, in his great work on "Man, his Frame, his Duty, and his Expectations," has spoken with much force upon the impropriety and futility of forming "any creeds, articles, or systems of faith, and requiring assent to them in words or writing." The whole of his remarks on this subject deserve your attention; a few of them only can be introduced here.

"How," observes he, "can a person be properly qualified to study the word of God, and to search out its meaning, who finds himself previously confined to interpret it in a particular manner? If the subject matter of the article be of great importance to be understood and believed, one may presume that it is plain, and

* Harris's Life of Ch. 1. p. 189. †Tracts, &c. v. 1. p. 419.

needs no article ; if of small importance, why should it be made a test or insisted upon ? If it be a difficult, abstruse point, no one upon earth has authority to make an article concerning it. We are all brethren ; there is no father, no master, amongst us ; we are helpers of, not lords over, each other's faith."

" Let us suppose the person required to assent or subscribe, to be a real earnest believer. It can scarce be supposed that such a person should assent to any set of articles, so as honestly to affirm, that he would choose to express his own sense of the scripture language in those words. To strain either the scriptures, or the articles, must be a very ungrateful task to an ingenuous man ; and perhaps there may be so wide a difference in some instances, in his opinion, that no straining can bring them together."

" If the scriptures cannot yet produce a true unity of opinion on account of our present ignorance and the weakness and wickedness of our natures, how should articles do this ? Men can put as different senses upon articles, as upon texts, and so dispute without end."

" As to the metaphysical subtilties which appear in some creeds, they can at best be only human interpretations of scripture words ; and therefore can have no authority. All the real foundation which we have is in the words of scripture, and of the most ancient writers, considered as helps, not authorities. It is sufficient therefore, that a man take the scriptures for his guide, and apply himself to them with an honest heart, and humble and earnest prayer ; which things have no connexion with forms and subscriptions."*

A learned divine of Germany, who wrote " Notes and Additions," which have been thought worthy to accompany the celebrated work of Hartley, enters more fully into this subject, and presents many interesting views of it, which we can now do little more than allude to. He shows that it is incumbent on the defenders of human articles of faith to prove that, without them, the scriptures alone would be insufficient to attain the great pur-

* Page 514, 4to ed.

pose for which God gave them to us; that these creeds are more powerful instruments against the doubts, ignorance, or wickedness of those who go astray, than the holy scriptures; or that the sense of the words of Jesus and his apostles may be more clearly and unequivocally laid down in unscriptural expressions, than in those employed by them; and that without human articles of faith, such a variety of opinions and difference of religion must arise, as would render the uniformity of teaching necessary to general edification utterly impossible. "All this must be proved, before we can appeal to the right of the church, as a community, authorizing it to establish opinions for the whole body according to its own pleasure, and to exclude those from the society who refuse to submit to them."

Adverting to Dr. Hartley's remark upon the uselessness of articles in preventing differences and disputes, he instances the church of England, in which "experience clearly shows that though the thirty nine articles were established for the purpose of preventing difference of opinion, this end has not been in the smallest degree promoted by them. One of the strongest proofs of this is, that bishop Burnet, in his learned exposition of those articles, endeavors so to explain them, that people who entertain very different opinions with respect to their purport may receive and subscribe them. Probably a similar commentary might be written on the articles of faith of every protestant church with similar effect.—Not unfrequently," he observes, "the expressions of articles of faith are industriously contrived to be indeterminate and equivocal, to allow some difference of opinion, at least in points considered as not absolutely essential."

He then proceeds to show how superior to the scholastic and abstract style of these artificial formularies of faith, is the simple and natural manner of the scriptures, which divine wisdom has seen fit to adopt in communicating truth to the human mind. "The instruction given us in the scriptures is, for the most part, conveyed to us in an historical manner, and is on that account most clear and intelligible to every capacity. The doctrines of our religion are delivered in the history of our saviour; and this history is the christian's system of instruction. To understand

the principal facts it relates, nothing more is necessary, than a knowledge of the language in which it is written ; and with a little attention I can discern the doctrines comprised in those facts, and founded on them, with more certainty and facility, than if they stood alone unconnected with any circumstances. The saying of Jesus, for example, ‘ I am the resurrection and the life,’ might admit of various explanations ; but if we connect it with the awakening of one from the dead, on which occasion it was spoken, no one can mistake its true sense. The epistles of the apostles refer to the history of Jesus and other facts, and as they elucidate these, they are reciprocally illustrated by them.”

After a full discussion of this topic, and after making some ingenious inquiries why these attempts at producing uniformity should be confined to the doctrines of belief, exclusive of those of morality ; heresies in the latter being not less possible, and far more dangerous ; the bible not presenting us with a regular system of morals any more than of faith, but exhibiting the duties as well as theory of christianity in popular language and without art ; this learned commentator concludes, that “ the holy scriptures alone, without any human addition, or authoritative interpretations, are sufficient to maintain the unity of doctrine necessary for general instruction and edification ;” and that “ the only necessary unity of opinion is intelligible to the common capacity of mankind, without the aid of learning or philosophy.”*

In relation to this view of the subject, the author of *Paradise Lost* has some remarks, in his ‘ *Treatise on Christian Doctrine*,’ which are entitled to your consideration. “ The scriptures,” he says, “ being in themselves so perspicuous, and sufficient of themselves to make men wise unto salvation, through what infatuation is it, that even protestant divines persist in darkening the most momentous truths of religion by intricate metaphysical comments, on the plea that such explanation is necessary ; as if scripture, which possesses in itself the clearest light, and is suffi-

* *Ib.* p. 699.

cient for its own explanation, especially in matters of faith and holiness, required to have the simplicity of its divine truths more fully developed, and placed in a more distinct view, by illustrations drawn from the abstrusest of human sciences.”

“Certainly, if the apostles themselves, in a council governed by the inspiration of the holy spirit, determined that even the divinely instituted law was a yoke from which believers ought to be exempt; much less is any modern church, which cannot allege a similar claim to the presence of the spirit, and least of all is the magistrate, entitled to impose on believers a creed nowhere found in scripture, or which is merely inferred from thence by human reasonings, carrying with them no certain conviction.”*

“No church has,” says bishop Sherlock, “nor have all churches together, any authority to make articles of faith. Jesus Christ was the author and finisher of the faith, to which nothing can be added, and from which nothing can be taken away.—The apostles themselves were but teachers and witnesses of the faith, and had no authority or commission to make new articles of faith.”†

“Lodge your church authority in what hands you will,” says archdeacon Blackburne, “you cannot assert to it a right to require assent to a certain sense of scripture, exclusive of other senses, without an unwarrantable interference with those rights of private judgment, which are manifestly secured to every individual by the scriptural terms of christian liberty, and thereby contradicting the original principles of the protestant reformation.”

In remarking upon the argument which had been urged for confessions of faith, that they present “a clear elucidation of divine meanings,” this learned author observes: “It is a common complaint that these formularies of doctrine, abounding in artificial and scholastic terms, are rather apt to perplex and confound things that are otherwise clear and plain, than to illustrate any thing with a superior degree of perspicuity.”‡

* Vol. 2, p. 165, 176.

† Discourses, v. 4, Dis. 12.

‡ Works, v. 5, p. 187, 200.

Nor should we forget the injury which the cause of christianity sustains from all such human additions to its divine simplicity. "The brightness with which the evidence of the christian religion shines," says Dr. Gerard, the late learned professor of divinity at Aberdeen, "will always bear a proportion to the purity in which that religion is preserved. It may be so much corrupted, that the compounded, adulterated form, which assumes the name of christianity, cannot be defended. Christians have in many instances loaded their religion with absurdities to which reason cannot be reconciled, and which, by being confounded with the gospel, obscure its evidence. Corruptions of christianity stain its evidence, as it were, with a dim varnish, which is of the more dangerous consequence, because it is not suspected to be a varnish, but mistaken for the genuine color, and even reckoned by some the most beautiful part of the christian system."

"Every person who is at all acquainted with the subject knows, that infidels have derived their most plausible objections against the excellence and utility of the gospel from the corruptions with which christianity is blended in the popish religion, and from the remains of the tenets and spirit thence arising, which still adhere to many protestants. These have given them occasion to represent the gospel as a disputatious system of dry, speculative, intricate, abstruse opinions; as promoting a spirit of superstition, irrational and abject, and as giving countenance to priestcraft and usurpation over the consciences of men."*

Testimonials of this nature in behalf of the pure bible, as our standard in religion, might be multiplied to almost any extent from the writings of those who have brought to the defence and exposition of it the deepest piety and learning. We will add one more, in this connexion, to which we are naturally brought by all the rest, and which can never be too often repeated.

"The bible, the bible only," says the immortal Chillingworth, "is the religion of protestants. I, for my part, after a long and, as I verily believe and hope, impartial search of the true way to

* Discourses on the Genius and Evidences of Christianity, p. 410.

eternal happiness, do profess plainly that I cannot find any rest for the sole of my foot but upon this rock only. This therefore, and this only I have reason to believe ; this I will profess ; according to this I will live, and for this, if there be occasion, I will, not only willingly, but even gladly lose my life, though I should be sorry that christians should take it from me. I will take no man's liberty of judgment from him ; neither shall any man take mine from me. I will think no man the worse man, or the worse christian ; I will love no man the less for differing in opinion from me. And what measure I mete to others, I expect from them again. I am fully assured that God does not, and therefore that man ought not to require any more of any man than this, to believe the scripture to be God's word, to endeavor to find the true sense of it, and to live according to it."*

How happy would it be for the christian world, if all who profess to be followers of the meek and lowly Jesus would adopt these noble sentiments, discard all human tests of orthodoxy, and, in the spirit of their blessed master, labor to advance the work of reformation according to the pure word of God, till all their churches are restored to the standard of apostolical purity in doctrine and worship. Let us do our part in this great work. However attached we may be to any human articles of faith ; even should we feel as if upon losing them, we should exclaim with Micah, " ye have taken away my gods, and what have I more ?" yet let us be assured that, when we have understood their true nature, we shall rejoice in being released from them. Let us take encouragement from the reply of the truly evangelical Dr. Chandler to some in his day, who inquired what security they should have left for truth and orthodoxy, when their articles of faith were gone: " We shall have," said he, " the sacred scriptures, those oracles of the great God, and freedom and liberty to interpret and understand them as we can. The consequence of this would be great integrity and peace of conscience in the enjoyment of our religious principles, union

* Works, 271.

and friendship among christians, notwithstanding all their differences in judgment, and great respect and honor to those faithful pastors, who carefully feed the flock of God, and lead them into pastures of righteousness and peace. We shall lose only the incumbrances of religion, our bones of contention, the shackles of our consciences, and the snares to virtue and honesty ; while all that is substantially good and valuable, all that is truly divine and heavenly, would remain to enrich and bless us.”*

A late learned orthodox biographer of Baxter, in describing the result of those labors and struggles against ecclesiastical oppression, in which that great man bore so conspicuous a part, considers the leading principles of the reformation as now completely settled, never again to be called in question. “The untenable and unrighteous exactions of authority,” he says, “were exposed, the supreme authority of the scriptures maintained, and the rights of conscience at last established. That principle stood forth before the world, as no longer to be disputed, that man is accountable to God only for all that he believes as truth, for all that he offers as worship, and for all that he practises as religion. This is the doctrine of the bible, the dictate of enlightened reason ; and lies at the foundation of all correct and acceptable obedience to God.”†

It is not, indeed, because these were the principles of the reformation that we attach such importance to them, but because we regard them as immutable laws of our being, founded in the very nature and constitution of the human mind, and sanctioned by the gospel of Christ. Reason and conscience, the highest gifts of God to man, were evidently bestowed with the design that they should be exercised to our highest good. Their peculiar value consists not in the possession, but in the right use of them. If not exercised and used to the purposes for which they are given, the possession of them ceases to be a blessing, and leads on the contrary to our condemnation. Our heavenly Father, in the communications which he makes to us, addresses

* Introduction to History of Inquisition p. 110.

† Orme's Life and Times of Richard Baxter, v. 2, 190.

us all as rational and accountable beings, and requires of all alike, that we should employ the faculties, which he has bestowed, in judging of the evidence and intent of his communications.

Thus, under the influence of his spirit, by faithfully exercising our own faculties, with a sincere desire and love of truth, and using the best means in our power, we are enabled to attain a real persuasion of truth, which, whatever may be the differences of judgment attending our inquiries, will be a safe guide to each one's conscience, and a sure foundation of that faith in God and obedience to his will, which render us acceptable in his sight. Without this inward conviction and personal persuasion of truth, our religion can be little more than mere profession, and however accompanied by correspondent external acts, cannot be pleasing to him who demands our reasonable service, who searches the heart and will be worshipped in spirit and in truth. So far as we neglect to inquire and judge for ourselves and rely upon others to judge for us, or content ourselves with professing or even believing certain doctrines as contained in creeds and confessions devised for us by fallible mortals, instead of examining the divine oracles for ourselves, and seeking the truth as it is in Jesus ; so far we place our confidence in man rather than God, and fail of respect and obedience to his authority. Thus the free exercise of our own reason and judgment is manifestly essential to all true faith in Christ and all acceptable obedience to God, and consequently to our eternal well-being. Hence it necessarily follows, that the right of free inquiry and private judgment, in the concerns of religion, is an inalienable right, which we could not surrender if we would ; the exercise of it being our indispensable duty, as well as our highest privilege. It necessarily follows also, that we are bound to respect in each other the exercise of this right, so far at least as to refrain from doing any thing to prevent the perfect enjoyment of it.

That these principles are sanctioned by the gospel of Christ, we need but open the sacred volume to be convinced. Nothing can be clearer in the christian scriptures, than those commands, which require us to judge for ourselves in matters of conscience, and to refrain from judging others.

“Why even of yourselves judge ye not what is right?—Search the scriptures.—Prove all things; hold fast that which is good.—I speak as to wise men, judge ye what I say.—Be always ready to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you, with meekness and fear.—Judge not.—Condemn not.—One is your master even Christ, and all ye are brethren.—Who art thou that judgest another’s servant? Before his own master he standeth or falleth.—Why dost thou judge thy brother? Why dost thou set at naught thy brother? For we shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ. Let us not therefore judge one another any more; but judge this rather, that no man put a stumbling block or an occasion to fall in his brother’s way.”

These directions of our saviour and his apostles show the spirit which breathes throughout the gospel. On what account were the Bereans called more noble than some others? Was it because they implicitly received the doctrines taught even by inspired apostles? No. It was for searching the scriptures daily, to see for themselves whether those things were so. What was the conduct of St. Paul on the occasion of giving the directions just referred to, when disputes and divisions arose between the Jewish and Gentile christians at Rome about the obligation of the Mosaic ritual? Did he peremptorily require those whom he knew to be in the wrong to renounce their error, and adopt his opinion, or that of their better informed brethren, in order to be entitled to their communion and fellowship? Far from it. He presses upon all equally the duty of mutual forbearance and charity; and enjoins the same rule upon both parties, grounding it on the perfect right which all possessed, to inquire and judge for themselves on the subject. “Let every man,” says he, “be fully persuaded in his own mind.” That is, in the language of a learned expositor of this rule, “let every man enjoy the freedom of following the light of his conscience, and let no christians carry their zeal for agreement so far as to break in upon our title to God’s favor, which is, acting sincerely according to the inward conviction of our own minds.”*

* Abernethy.

“How strong a text this is,” says Dr. Doddridge, “for the right of private judgment.—Let all the different sects and parties of christians,” adds he, “study to imbibe more of the equitable and lovely temper which the apostle here expresses in so genuine a manner. The divisions of the church are not to be healed by imposing our own sentiments, phrases, and forms, and censuring and harassing those who will not acquiesce in them. Such a temper will only engender strife, and mutual provocation will produce mutual increasing resentment. Let us receive our weaker brethren with tenderness and respect; not despising those who scruple what we practise, nor judging those who practise what we scruple. God may receive the one and the other; yea, the different practices of both may proceed from the same general principles, a desire to please him, and to approve ourselves in his sight.—Let us not add to all the offences, which may justly cause us to tremble before his tribunal, the criminal arrogance of usurping the place and prerogative of our judge.”*

“The general principles of morality explained in this admirable discourse of the apostle,” says Dr. Macknight, “are of unalterable obligation, and may be applied with great advantage for preventing us both from lording it over the consciences of our brethren, and from submitting to their unrighteous impositions in matters of religion. For what can be more useful to christians in every age, than to be assured by an inspired apostle that Christ is the only Lord of the consciences of his servants, and the judge of their hearts? That he has not delegated this great prerogative to any man or body of men whatever: That to him alone, and not to one another, they are accountable for their religious opinions and actions: That in all cases where difference of opinion in religious matters takes place, every man should guide himself by his own persuasion, and not by the opinion of others: That we ought charitably to believe concerning others, that both in opinion and practice they act as conscientiously as we do; and therefore, instead of hating them, either for their opinions, or for their mode of worshipping God, we ought to live

* Family Expositor, v. 4. p. 173.

in peace and friendship with them, notwithstanding these differences.”*

Together with these illustrations of the rule and example left us by the great apostle, you will read with interest some eloquent remarks of the late Robert Hall upon our saviour’s manner of treating his disciples. In enforcing his position, “that no church has a right to establish terms of communion, which are not terms of salvation,” he observes: “A tender consideration of human imperfections is not merely the dictate of revelation, but the law of nature, exemplified in the most striking manner, in the conduct of him whom we all profess to follow. How wide the interval which separated his religious knowledge and attainments from that of his disciples; he, the fountain of illumination, they encompassed with infirmities. But did he recede from them on that account? No; he drew the bond of union closer, imparted successive streams of effulgence, till he incorporated his spirit with theirs, and elevated them into a nearer resemblance to himself. In imitating by our conduct towards our mistaken brethren this great exemplar, we cannot err. By walking together with them as far as we agree, our agreement will extend, our differences lessen, and love, which rejoiceth in the truth, will gradually open our hearts to higher and nobler inspirations.”†

We cannot forbear to add, in this place, the strong testimony which this admired author bears against any departure from the scriptural terms of communion. In the preface to his work on this subject, he states, that the “practice of incorporating private opinions and human inventions with the constitutions of a church, and with the terms of communion, has long appeared to him untenable in its principle, and pernicious in its effects. There is no position in the whole compass of theology, of the truth of which he feels a stronger persuasion, than that no man, or set of men, are entitled to prescribe as an indispensable condition of communion, what the New Testament has not enjoined as a condition of salvation.”‡

* Translation of the Epistles, v. 1, 449.

† Works, v. 1, p. 106. ‡ Ib. p. 19.

The leading principles upon which this position rests you will not deny. We know that you acknowledge the scriptures alone to be of divine authority, and we cannot doubt that you admit also the right of private judgment in the interpretation of them; how then will you persist in maintaining that a christian church has authority to require, as a necessary condition of communion, subscription or assent to human articles of faith, fixing that interpretation in a certain sense? Some further views of the inconsistency of such a practice with such principles may be presented to you from the writings of several of our old standard American divines, whom we have not had opportunity before of introducing to your notice.

The learned author of the *New England Chronology*, who was pastor of the Old South Church in Boston, bears the following testimony against this practice: "Is Christ so earnestly desirous of his people's unity? How lamentable is it, that any should presume to prevent the accomplishment of this desire, by adding terms of such a union as Christ himself has not required! What an awful opposition to this desire are they engaged in, who prevent this unity by imposing on the conscience things which, the imposers own, Christ has not appointed; and source his people to this hard necessity, either to sin against their light, or else to separate from their imposing brethren! And how opposite both to christian charity and union is it, for the imposers to make themselves the judges of the hearts of those who differ from them, and engross the sacred name of conscience to themselves, by asserting that the dissent of others is from humour only, and not from conscience!"*

Dr. Mayhew, the great advocate of the American churches, in the episcopal controversy of the last century, was an unwearied defender of religious freedom and the rights of conscience. "If it be asked," he says, "who these spiritual invaders are, it may be answered, all in general who set themselves up to judge for their neighbors; all who are for imposing their opinions upon others; all who in any way distress and afflict such as differ from

* Prince's Sermon after the death of Cotton Mather, 1732.

them in their religious sentiments; all who make use of any other weapons besides those of reason and argument, in order to demolish error and propagate truth. If a man has a right to judge for himself, certainly no other has a right to judge for him; and to attempt it is to strike at the most valuable interest of a man considered as a reasonable creature."

After mentioning the more violent ways of invading this right, he proceeds: "Another practice is that of *creed-making*, setting up human tests of orthodoxy, instead of the infallible word of God; and making other terms of christian communion than those explicitly pointed out in the gospel. For any man, or any set of men whatever to do this, is plainly to arrogate to themselves the right of judging for their neighbors; and to deter people, as far as they are able, from seeing with their own eyes, and judging even of themselves what is right."

"The divisions and contentions that have hitherto happened, and still subsist in the christian church, are all, in a manner, owing to the unchristian temper and conduct of those who could not content themselves with scripture orthodoxy, with the simple and spiritual worship of the Father, enjoined by our saviour, and with the platform of church discipline contained in the New Testament; but must go to coining new articles of faith, new modes and rites of worship, making new canons, and prescribing new rules for the regulation of the church,"*

Dr. Tucker, also distinguished in his day by talents, piety, and zeal for christian liberty, says: "Can protestants act a consistent part, or be likely to live together in peace and love, on any other foundation but this? That they all acknowledge the sacred scriptures to be the only perfect rule of faith, and the test by which all doctrines are to be tried; that as every man must believe for himself, so every man has a right to see and understand for himself; to judge of the sense of scripture, and to try all doctrines by that rule: And therefore, that no man, or body of men, since the days of inspiration, can have any authority to

* Sermons on the Right and Duty of Private Judgment.

fix the sense of scripture for others, and require their consent thereto."

"In this, at least, let us have one faith and one practice, that we believe the bible to be the only standard of religious truth, and make it the measure of a good heart, and of a good life.— We might then hope to see some happy revival of primitive christianity; the gospel in its first glory, and the churches at peace."*

Dr. Stiles, late president of Yale College, as decidedly orthodox as he was truly liberal in his sentiments, raised his voice against all restrictions upon conscience. "It is indeed a little unhappy," he says, "that, like others in the christian world, some of us are fond of substituting human interpretations given by authority of councils and learned men, exacting that the sacred scriptures be understood according to senses fitted and defined in human tests, which all acknowledge to be fallible. But it is to be hoped, that we shall stand fast in the liberty wherewith the gospel has made us free. There ought to be no restrictions on the conscience of an honest and sober believer of revelation. The right of conscience and private judgment is unalienable."

"I am satisfied we shall err less if we make the scriptures the only rule of faith, than if we depart from this, and substitute another; or as many do, who say they believe the scriptures the *only* rule, and yet in all their judgments on scripture, measure that *only* rule by *another* rule. Nor do substituted rules answer the purpose of detecting heretics at all better than the primary rule, since in experience it is found none more freely subscribe and swear to human tests than deists, skeptics, and the most debauched. If God's inclosure will not keep out the erroneous, can it be expected that ours will? The universal pretext is a preservation against heresy. But it is to be remarked, that human tests make more heretics than the word of God; all that one determines to be heresy, is not heresy by the scriptures. A man may be a very great heretic according to the one, and an

* Sermon at Ordination of Moody, 1765.

excellent christian according to the other, at the same time. Saint Paul was one of the greatest heretics, and even gloried in his heresy, and yet was one of the best of christians."

"Our churches, in a distinguished sense from almost all the protestant world, are founded on the bible. Our worthy and venerable ancestors did not, like other protestant patrons, form a system of what they thought and judged the true sense of revelation, and establish this for the truth: No; it was enough for them, that the bible was the inspired rule, and this they made the only rule."*

To the testimony of these divines you will allow us to add one more, that of the immortal William Penn, whose 'Address to Protestants' is well worthy of your attention. A single passage only can be given here. "It is strange," he says, "that God and Christ should be wanting to express or discover their own mind; or that the words used by the holy ghost should have that shortness, ambiguity or obliquity in them, that our frail capacities should be needed to make them more easy, proper, and intelligible. But that we should scarcely deliver any one article of faith in scripture terms, and yet make such acts the rule and bond of christian communion, is, in my judgment, an offence heinous against God and holy scripture, and very injurious to christian charity and fellowship. Who can express any man's mind so fully as himself? And shall we allow that liberty to ourselves, and deny it to God?—I must say it is preposterous, and a contradiction, that those who desire to deliver their *faith* of truth in the *language* of truth, should not be reputed true believers, nor their faith admitted."

Such is the united voice, which comes to you from the departed worthies of the church, who in different ages and nations have been among the ablest expounders and brightest ornaments of christianity. It is full, clear, distinct, and harmonious. Will you not regard it, so far, at least, as to be persuaded to make a faithful and conscientious inquiry into the subject, which they so earnestly recommend to your attention? Can you in justice

* Convention Sermon, 1760.

to them or yourselves do less than this? Would not such an inquiry enable you more justly to appreciate their views and principles, if you should not be led to adopt them; and would it not add to your knowledge and expand your charity, even should it fail to enlighten your faith? Is it possible, that proofs and considerations, which carried the fullest conviction to the minds of men, who devoted the highest gifts of intellect and learning to the cause of truth and piety, should bring no light to your minds engaged in the same holy cause? No, surely. You could not fail to see the infinite difference between the word of God and the word of man; the inspired scriptures and mere human creeds; and to acknowledge that, while all are bound by the one, none are obliged to regard the other. You would be brought to question, at least, the right of a christian church to add to the bible any articles of man's devising, as a surer test of revealed truth; and, whatever might continue to be your own usage as to such additional tests, you would not condemn the established practice of this church in relation to them, nor consider it as affording any evidence, that we reject the fundamental doctrines of christianity.

You will now permit us to call your attention to the principle, which you seem to assume, upon the supposition that we reject certain doctrines which you receive as fundamental. As we understand your meaning, it is because you suppose that we reject such doctrines, that you refuse to recognize us as a christian church, and charge us with "a dereliction from the great doctrines of christianity." If so, do you not assume the judgment seat, and make your own opinions the standard for determining the christian faith and character of others? And what is the spirit of such a proceeding? Is it not of the very essence of popery? Would it not be so indeed, if, instead of mere supposition, you had perfect evidence of the fact; if you had specified all the doctrines which your church receives as fundamental, and had clearly shown that this church rejects them? Why, even in that case, should your judgment, any more than ours, be the standard of truth in fundamentals; unless, like the infallible church, you cannot err; and, like that too, claim to hold the

keys, and to have authority to judge others? But this ground you will not take. All such pretensions you would disclaim. You glory, equally with us, in the name and character of protestants. And what are the obligations implied by this? Are you not bound to allow us the same right and privilege, which you claim, of searching the scriptures and ascertaining for ourselves the truth of christian doctrines, be they fundamental or not? Are you not bound to treat us as being accountable, not to you, but, in common with you, to our final judge, for the manner in which we discharge this duty? How then can you presume to judge and condemn us, for being led by our inquiries to differ in opinion from you, upon this momentous subject? It may not be possible for us, you must be aware, to avoid this, without unfaithfulness to conscience and to God. And will you pretend that a conscientious adherence to his unerring word, as the standard of faith and duty, can justly expose us to your condemnation? Will you say, as others have said, that your conscience requires you to denounce those whose religious opinions you consider as essentially wrong, and consequently proceeding from a perverse interpretation of scripture?

But who made you judges of your brethren in the interpretation of scripture? Is not this an assumption of infallibility? "All that infallibility," says Robert Hall, "which the church of Rome pretends to, is the right of placing her interpretation of scripture on a level with the word of God; she professes to promulgate no new revelation, but solely to render her sense of it binding." While you are content to enjoy your interpretations of scripture in the regulation of your own faith and practice, and accord the same to others, you act a truly protestant part; but when, not satisfied with this, you insist upon forcing your interpretations upon the conscience of your brethren, and treat them as though they avowedly contradicted Christ and his apostles, that moment you assume infallibility, and become aggressors. We have shown you, from an inspired apostle, what are the true rights of conscience in such cases. According to the rule laid down by him, you may claim every indulgence for your own conscientious opinions, though they should be errone-

ous ; but not the least favor, when you deny the same indulgence to your brethren, and proceed to denounce them for opinions or interpretations of scripture, which may be equally conscientious with your own. To do this is not a right of the conscience, but a wrong of the will. In the language of the author just quoted, "it is not a defensive, but an offensive measure ; it is not an assertion of christian liberty by resisting encroachment, but is itself a violent encroachment on the freedom of others." Is it not, indeed, that rash, uncharitable, sinful judging of others, the very offence so pointedly condemned by our saviour and his apostles ? And must not the commission of this great offence, like that of every other sin, be at the peril of those who are guilty of it ?

Can we then, it may be asked, do nothing to suppress what we deem to be gross errors in the faith of our christian brethren ? Yes, much. We may strive to convince them of their errors, and to lead them into a knowledge of the truth by every argument and persuasion which we are able to urge ; and to secure their good will and attention to our arguments, we may, by friendly intercourse and christian kindness, manifest the spirit of love and charity, which our own purer principles of faith inspire. And by extending the influence of such laudable efforts as wide as possible, we may do all that is in our power to prevent the spread of their errors. If they refuse to listen to us from a conviction that their errors are precious truths, and that it would be dangerous to consider any arguments opposed to them, we may enforce the great duty of free inquiry into religious opinions, of examining both sides of a question in order to a right decision, of searching the scriptures and judging for ourselves of the truths of christianity, and welcoming the light of evidence from whatever source it may come. We may remind them, too, of the supreme authority of the scriptures in matters of faith ; and endeavor to guard them against receiving for doctrines the commandments or opinions of men.

With such efforts to reclaim our erring brethren, and to refute their doctrines, may not our consciences be satisfied, without usurping the judgment seat of Christ, and sentencing them to

banishment from his kingdom, or denying their right and title as subjects of it? If we are not to be deterred from such a proceeding by the fearful responsibility attending it, and the just retributions which must await us, should we not be restrained by the consideration that our arrogant attempts to impair the rights of Christ's subjects are utterly impotent, except as they recoil upon our own heads? The weapons of this warfare are carnal; the passions and prejudices of men are the instruments, which must be relied on for success, and the whole force and effect of these are confined to the mere earthly region, where they exist and prevail. However they may enable us to destroy a brother's reputation and influence among weak mortals, like ourselves, they cannot reach the kingdom of Christ. His kingdom is not of this world.

Protestants are perpetually forgetting their peculiar obligations to observe those principles of the gospel, which are called principles of protestantism, because promulgated and professed by protestants, and therefore, in a more especial manner, binding upon them. They forget that they are bound by these principles, as being their own acknowledged principles, bound in honor as well as conscience, not to disregard them. They forget the true distinction, in this respect, between them and professed papists.

In order to see this distinction in its true light, let us recur for a moment to its origin. Let us suppose a company of protestant christians just emerged from popery, renouncing all human authority in religion, by which uniformity of opinion had been so vainly and so impiously sought, and agreeing to substitute for it the supreme authority of the scriptures, with the right of every believer to examine them for himself, and form his religious opinions by the free exercise of his own judgment, upon his sole responsibility, accountable for them to none but his final judge. All hopes of uniformity in religious doctrine or profession, and all efforts to produce it, are of course given up; but what is of infinitely more value, a real faith, founded upon rational conviction, and producing the unity of the spirit amidst diversity of opinions, is intended and thought to be secured. United by a

common belief in the gospel, and enjoying as christian brethren the rights thus pledged to each other, shall they cease to be brethren in consequence of unavoidable differences of opinion arising in the course of those inquiries, which it is their common duty to make? Can any of them forfeit their christian name or standing by an honest exercise of their mutually acknowledged rights? Are they not all equally bound, notwithstanding any such diversity of opinions, to continue their christian fellowship, to follow "the meekness and gentleness of Christ," and to cultivate mutual charity, forbearance, and peace? Can they otherwise remain faithful to their professed principles, and to their common master? Who among them shall arise to judge his brother, or to set at naught his brother? No one of them can assume to do this, without violating his peculiar obligations, as well as the spirit of the gospel, and the rule laid down by the apostle. He must first surrender his character as a protestant christian, and go back to the pope for a commission to judge and condemn his brethren in the faith.

In our remarks thus far upon this point, we have, for the purpose of argument, taken it for granted, that we differ from you in respect to fundamentals, as much as you have supposed. But of this, as you must perceive, there is no evidence; for you have not undertaken to state any of the doctrines which your church receives as fundamental, nor any of those which this church is even supposed to reject. And it appears, in fact, that this church, so far from rejecting any christian doctrines, has not rejected any human articles concerning them, except by not adopting them; and that, in receiving the bible, it receives all the doctrines contained in it, in the very words, and, as we believe, in the true sense of the inspired writers. In judging us, therefore, as rejecting those fundamentals which you receive, and consequently charging us with a dereliction from the great doctrines of christianity, you must have proceeded altogether upon supposition. And is the supposition which you make candid, or charitable, or just? Why should you not suppose that we are competent to judge what are the essential truths revealed in the scriptures? Why should you not suppose that we receive from

the bible the same fundamental doctrines, which you receive purely from that source?

You doubtless believe the same great truths of christianity which we do, as far as they go, and differ from us principally in the additions which you make to them. Why should you not suppose, that, in respect to these additions, you may be unconsciously guided by the Westminster confession and catechism, which all who become members of your church must approve, as presenting "an excellent system of the doctrines of our holy religion;" but which we cannot regard in the same favorable light? Is it not quite possible, that some of the doctrines, which you consider as fundamental, may have been derived from this secondary source, the scripture foundation of which we should maintain as firmly as you? Take, for instance, the statement about the trinity, in the second chapter of the Westminster confession: "In the unity of the Godhead there be three persons, of one substance, power and eternity; God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost. The Father is of none, neither begotten nor proceeding; the Son is eternally begotten of the Father, the Holy Ghost eternally proceeding from the Father and the Son." This statement we cannot adopt, for we find nothing like it in the bible; but the scripture views of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, are as precious to us as they can be to you. Here, too, we are in company with the excellent Dr. Watts, who is well known to have rejected this statement, and who expressly says, "of the scholastic account of generation and procession I have no idea."*

So also in respect to the doctrines of election, total depravity, &c., there are various statements in this confession, which perhaps in your view present what is fundamental, but in ours may appear to contain much that is directly opposite to the sincere word of God. We beg leave to suggest a few of these for your consideration, which, as they are doubtless familiar to your minds, need not be recited more at large.

"By the decree of God, for the manifestation of his glory,

* Letter to Rev. Mr. Alexander, 1727.

some men and angels are predestinated unto everlasting life, and others foreordained to everlasting death." These "are particularly and unchangeably designed, and their number is so certain and definite, that it cannot be either increased or diminished. Those of mankind that are predestinated unto life, God, before the foundation of the world, &c., hath chosen in Christ unto everlasting glory, &c., without any foresight of faith, or good works, or perseverance in either of them, or any other thing in the creature, as conditions or causes moving him thereunto; and all to the praise of his glorious grace. As God hath appointed the elect unto glory, so hath he, by the eternal and most free purpose of his will, foreordained all the means thereunto."

"Neither are any other redeemed by Christ, effectually called, &c. but the elect only. The rest of mankind God was pleased, &c. to pass by, and to ordain them to dishonor and wrath for their sin, to the praise of his glorious justice."

"All those whom God hath predestinated unto life, and those only, he is pleased, in his appointed and accepted time, effectually to call by his word and spirit, out of that state of sin and death in which they are by nature, &c. This effectual call is of God's free and special grace alone, not from any thing at all foreseen in man, who is altogether passive therein, &c. Elect infants, dying in infancy, are regenerated and saved by Christ through the spirit, who worketh when, and where, and how he pleaseth."

The sin of our first parents, "God was pleased, &c. to permit, having purposed to order it to his own glory. By this sin they fell from their original righteousness, and communion with God, and so became dead in sin, and wholly defiled in all the faculties and parts of soul and body. They being the root of all mankind, the guilt of this sin was imputed, and the same death in sin and corrupted nature conveyed to all their posterity, &c. whereby we are utterly indisposed, disabled, and made opposite to all good, and wholly inclined to all evil."

Whether the doctrines, presented in these statements, amount to antinomianism, we will not undertake to determine, but they appear to us exceedingly like Robert Hall's description of that system; "a system," he says, "which cancels every moral tie,

consigns the whole human race to the extremes of presumption or despair, and erects religion on the ruins of morality.”* We have not, however, referred to these doctrines, which you know are but a specimen of what is contained in the Westminster confession, with any view of controverting them here, but to draw your attention to the simple fact, that, whatever may be our repugnance to them, we receive, equally with you, all the texts of inspired scripture upon which they are professedly founded, though we could not probably make the same use of these texts. We understand the division of the bible into chapters and verses to be a mere human work, executed in an arbitrary manner; and we believe that the true sense of any of the sacred books or epistles may be better ascertained from the whole in connexion, than from certain detached verses. And we beg you to examine the texts of scripture adduced by the authors of this confession, and printed in the margin, and put it to your consciences, after comparing them with other portions of scripture, whether you could have inferred such doctrines from them, had you not cherished so deep a reverence for this ancient standard of orthodoxy. Could you, for instance, have ventured with various disconnected texts, selected principally from the book of Genesis and from the most intricate of the apostolical epistles, without one word from the lips of Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, or a single text from any of the four evangelists, to construct such a christian doctrine as that of the total depravity of human nature in consequence of Adam’s transgression, its inability to all good, and entire inclination to all evil, insomuch that, as stated elsewhere in this confession, “works done by unregenerate men, although things which God commands, and of good use to themselves and others, are sinful and cannot please God, or make a man more meet to receive grace from God”? And could you think of styling this, by way of distinction, the *evangelical* faith?

If you truly hold this doctrine, is it not because you found it already constructed for you in the Westminster confession and

* Hall’s Works, v. 1, p. 142.

catechism? But we can feel no such reverence for these fallible compilations upon scripture, nor allow them to have any weight in our minds, except so far as they accord with divine truth. And if in our view they should appear irreconcilably opposed to this, which ought we to take for our guide? You will not hesitate in your answer. Do not then expect us to follow you into these regions of metaphysical divinity, where we look in vain for the bread of life, for the pure doctrines and precepts of the gospel, for the form of sound words, even the words of our Lord Jesus Christ. Whatever of revealed truth may be supposed to exist here, we had rather seek for it at its original source, the bible, where we are sure to find it unmixed with the delusive speculations of fallible, presumptuous men.

May we not in this way arrive at a true conception of the fundamentals of christianity? Is it not possible, too, that in taking a different course, you may be led to adopt as fundamental doctrines, some of those mere human statements and metaphysical deductions, which have no real foundation in the word of God? May you not be as liable to such an error, as some of the greatest, wisest and most devout men have been before you?

Transubstantiation was once held to be a fundamental doctrine of christianity. Sir Thomas More, that most learned and pious chancellor of England, could bring men to the stake for denying it. Luther, with all his boldness of reform, could but half renounce it, still holding to consubstantiation, scarcely less irrational; and breaking communion with those of his brethren, who would renounce it altogether. Even the Westminster catechism has been thought to contain expressions relating to the eucharist, which are more easily traced to this Lutheran scheme, than to the gospel.

From such instances of human weakness and error, let us learn caution how we depart from the pure word of God, in stating and ascertaining the doctrines which he has revealed. What could appear to us, at this day, more opposed to scripture, reason, and common sense, than the doctrine of transubstantiation, once so zealously contended for as an essential part of christiani-

ty? And can we be certain that some of those doctrines, which were always cherished along with this in the bosom of the Romish church, and are stated in terms equally remote from the simplicity of the gospel, may not hereafter appear as groundless, as the doctrine of the real presence now does?

Should not this consideration abate our zeal in contending for such doctrines, and keep alive our charity for those who conscientiously believe, that they have no existence in the bible? Should not the fact, that so many sincere and intelligent inquirers after truth fail to find them there, satisfy us, that they cannot be fundamental doctrines? Who are most likely to perceive these doctrines as they are truly revealed in the scriptures, those who take the bible for the sole guide of their inquiries, or those who connect with it some intricate system of doctrinal theology, formed by human ingenuity, under the influence, perhaps, of sectarian zeal? Allowing to both parties the same ability and faithfulness in their inquiries, the conclusion, it is manifest, must be in favor of those who are led solely by an infallible guide.

This conclusion will be strengthened, and our conviction, that the doctrines referred to are not fundamental, confirmed, if we consider of what nature are the fundamental doctrines of our religion, and the degree of ability necessary to understand them. They are not the deep results of metaphysical skill or learned investigation, but those evident truths, which all men of ordinary capacity and diligence may receive from a perusal of the bible. According to the most approved, enlightened, and orthodox judgment, among christians, "no doctrine is a fundamental, a necessary article of a christian's faith, but what is so plainly and distinctly revealed, as that an ordinary christian, sincere in his inquiries, cannot miss of the knowledge of it."*

The Westminster confession alone must be sufficient to satisfy your minds, as to the correctness of this position. In the first chapter of that work, it is declared that "all things in scripture are not alike plain in themselves, nor alike clear unto all; yet those things which are necessary to be known, believed, and

* Foster on Fundamentals.

observed, for salvation, are so clearly propounded and opened in some place of scripture or other, that not only the learned, but the unlearned, in a due use of the ordinary means, may attain unto a sufficient understanding of them."

With these principles accord those of that profound philosopher, Locke, who was no less successful in his investigation of the christian scriptures, than in his inquiries into the human understanding. These scriptures he studied through with the single purpose of ascertaining what is the faith required to make a man a christian. The result of his examination was, as may be seen in his 'Reasonableness of Christianity,' that this faith is "the believing the only true God, and Jesus Christ to be the Messiah whom he hath sent." In a vindication of this work, he quotes bishop Patrick as of the same opinion, and as saying that "it is the very same thing, to believe that Jesus is the Christ, and to believe that Jesus is the son of God." Such is the belief which makes one a christian, a subject of Christ's kingdom. "As for the rest of divine truths," he adds, "there is nothing more required of him, but that he receive all the parts of divine revelation, with a docility and disposition prepared to embrace and assent to all truths coming from God; and submit his mind to whatsoever shall appear to him to bear that character."

"The writers and wranglers in religion fill it with niceties, and dress it up with notions, which they make necessary and fundamental parts of it.—But," adds this great man, "whoever has used what means he is capable of for the informing of himself, with a readiness to believe and obey what shall be taught and prescribed by Jesus, his Lord and King, is a true and faithful subject of Christ's kingdom; and cannot be thought to fail in any thing necessary to salvation."*

"It is very common," says Dr. Gale, "to call those points we are fond of, fundamentals; and then think it very justifiable, nay commendable, to renounce communion with such as err in those fundamentals. But we seldom inquire whether the scrip-

* Locke's Reasonableness of Christianity, with the Vindication.

tures have declared them fundamentals; if not, I am sure we have no power to make them so; and to attempt to do it is to usurp Christ's authority; which he knew human nature too well to entrust with any man or body of men upon earth. What the scriptures make necessary to a christian's faith and practice will be found to be very plain and simple, and not to consist in many articles."*

To the same purpose much might be produced from the excellent writings of Baxter, but a single passage shall suffice. "All that," says he, "without which a man cannot be a good and holy christian, is plain and easy in itself; and Christ did choose therefore to speak to the capacity of the meanest." How, indeed, could it ever have been thought otherwise? To the poor and ignorant, more especially, was the gospel originally preached. It must therefore have been designed for them, and adapted to their comprehension. Among the poor and ignorant of the present day, protestants of every denomination boast of sending the bible, "without note or comment." But wherefore should it be so sent, if they may not of themselves learn from its pages all that is fundamental, or essential to make them christians?

Thus you must perceive that the fundamental doctrines of the gospel are not hidden from the common eye, but are made plain to every capacity, plain as the vision of the prophet, which "he who ran might read." Such is the judgment of the most learned in the scriptures, such is the universal sense of those who are engaged in spreading them through the world, and such is the decision of the Westminster confession itself. Hence it clearly follows, in the first place, that this church, with the bible for the man of our counsel, is competent to understand these doctrines; and, in the second place, that if your church has adopted certain doctrines which we are unable to learn from the bible, whatever else they may be, they cannot possibly be the fundamental doctrines of christianity.

We see not how you can avoid this conclusion, if you allow us

* Sermons, v. 4, p. 443.

common honesty in the use of the scriptures. It is possible, however, that you refuse to allow us this, and would be understood to mean by "a dereliction from the great doctrines of christianity," a wilful apostasy from the faith. It is possible that you may have such an assured feeling of the truth of certain doctrines, as stated in the Westminster confession and catechism—the trinity, for instance, though a term as foreign from the language of scripture as transubstantiation—that you cannot think us sincere and honest inquirers after truth, if we adopt not the same views and phraseology respecting it. If this be the case, we beg you to consider seriously whether such an assured feeling, even should you think it grounded upon divine illumination, can, of itself, be evidence of truth; since those of every religious persuasion, not excepting deists, have had it, and as they sometimes thought, to a supernatural degree.* And we beg you also to reflect, with an excellent Scotch divine, how widely "we depart from the meekness and humility of the gospel spirit, when we allow ourselves to think and to speak hardly of others, because they do not see every thing just in the same light with us, or have not freedom to express themselves in our phrases, which are, perhaps, not only unscriptural, but were unknown in the christian church for many centuries, and can claim no better nor higher original, than the dregs of the scholastic philosophy."†

Still, whatever you may think of us, or of our religious conduct and phraseology, if you admit that any honest, intelligent inquirers could be led by a study of the bible to embrace our views on this subject, the argument and conclusion respecting your supposed fundamentals remain the same. But if you deny the possibility of this, and judge us to be insincere or dishonest in our inquiries, merely from the result of those inquiries, from the religious opinions we conscientiously adopt, you have to consider the extent of your judgment, and the nature of the responsibility attending it. Together with us you must condemn, as unfaithful and insincere inquirers after divine truth, all those great and good men, and enlightened christians, who have adopt-

* See Life of Lord Herbert.

† Dr. Leechman.

ed views similar to ours respecting this leading doctrine of the Westminster confession of faith.

Are you prepared to pass such a sweeping judgment, and to assume such a tremendous responsibility? Are you prepared to denounce as apostates from the faith, or as unworthy of the christian name, men who have distinguished themselves in studying the word and works of God, and practising the precepts and exemplifying the spirit of his son? Can you in your consciences say of any men, who have devoted the highest powers of mind to the defence and elucidation of the christian faith, and adorned its profession with the brightest virtues and graces of the christian life, that they were not honest in their inquiries, not truly christians, and therefore unfit for your christian intercourse and communion? Would you say this of Newton, who could unfold the laws of the material universe, and yet investigate the evidences and doctrines of christianity, and whose simple faith and sincere piety shed such a lustre over his character as a philosopher? Would you say this of Locke, who so successfully explored the laws of the intellectual world, and applied all his great powers to a study of the scriptures, and who was no less remarkable for the christian purity of his life and manners, than for the apostolical simplicity of his views of the gospel? Would you say this of Lardner, who gave himself wholly to the religion of Christ, devoting a long and laborious life to the collection and exposition of its evidences, to the illustration of its genuine doctrines, and to the manifestation, by his own example, of its purifying spirit? Where else can be found such an accumulation of proofs showing the divine original of christianity, as in his works? They form, indeed, a storehouse of the choicest treasures of theological learning for the support and extension of the christian faith, through all succeeding generations of men. And shall he, who thus lived the christian, and who has done so much by his learning and piety to make others christians, and enable them to sustain the cause of Christ in the world, be denied the christian name and character, because he could not find the orthodox trinity in the inspired volume, and would not take it from any other?

And, to come within the circle of your own observation, have you not witnessed in the lives of some, whose faith was similar to Dr. Lardner's, proofs of christian excellence too powerful to allow you to call in question their claim to the christian character? Did not he, whose century of years has recently closed, exhibit abundantly to you and your fathers the fruits of a christian faith and spirit, "walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless?" What professor of christianity was ever known to you, who more constantly adorned his profession by active goodness and a holy example? Did you not honor, too, the christian virtues of that venerated man, who passed his last years in the communion of this church, but who, early in life, made a profession of his faith in your church, or in that from which yours was afterwards formed, and throughout a long course of public duties and trials, in war and in peace, undeviatingly maintained the purity, simplicity, and sacredness of the christian character? Was he not, indeed, for a longer period than you have existed as a church, what St. Paul enjoined upon "his own son in the faith,—an example of the believers in word, in conversation, in charity, in spirit, in faith, in purity?" Was he not careful to let no man despise his youth? Did he ever neglect the gift that was in him? Did he not meditate upon these things, and give himself wholly to his duties? And would you have hesitated to say of him, what our saviour said of Nathaniel, "behold, an Israelite indeed in whom there is no guile?" If such a man be not a christian, where on earth is a christian to be found? Must his name be struck from the christian roll, because his love of truth was stronger than the prejudice of education, and he could not in conscience retain his trinitarian views?

Both these eminent christians were nurtured in the bosom of calvinism, and initiated into all the doctrines of the Westminster catechism. But their profound love of truth, and reverence for the word of God, led them to examine by that unerring standard the doctrines which they had been taught, to prove all things and hold fast that which is good. Whatever would not abide this test, they could not hesitate to renounce, however important a place it might hold in human systems of divinity, the authority

of which had no weight with them, when opposed to the divine word. To go through with such an examination honestly, and surrender to truth long cherished opinions, requires peculiar energy of mind and conscience ; and deserves applause, not obloquy. "It is a hard thing," says Baxter, "to bring men to that self-denial and labor, as at age thoroughly and impartially to revise their juvenile conceptions ; and for them that learned words before things, to proceed to learn things now as appearing in their proper evidence. And indeed none but men of extraordinary acuteness and love of truth, and self-denial, and patience, are fit to do it."*

The distinguished men of whom we are speaking, faithfully accomplished this task. And can you be certain that if you, in like manner, had brought your early opinions to the test of the scriptures, and made the same impartial and conscientious inquiries which they did, you would not have arrived at the same result, and enjoyed those clear views of christian truth and duty, in which, for so many years, they rejoiced on earth, as we trust they now do in heaven ? However this might be, are such men to be repelled from your communion, as heretics, under pretence, too, of apostolic authority ; men who are, in the language of Robert Hall, "illustrious examples of piety ; men who would tremble at the thought of deliberately violating the least of the commands of Christ, or of his apostles ; men whose character and principles, consequently, form a striking contrast with those of the persons whom it is allowed the apostles would have repelled ? Are we to separate ourselves from the best of men, because the apostles would have withdrawn from the worst ?"

If any of the eminent christians whose characters we have now pointed out to you, or any, indeed, of the many thousands of those who have been conscientiously led to embrace similar views of christianity, could have honestly studied the scriptures in forming their religious opinions, which, we think, you will hardly deny ; the conclusion before drawn, that your supposed fundamental doctrines cannot be really such, remains in all its force,

* Vol. 4, p. 502.

and the very ground of your judgment against the christian character of this church is taken away. The simple fact is, not that we reject any fundamental doctrines, but that we differ in opinion from you.

But should you still persist in condemning us for opinions, which we hold in common with such honored professors of christianity, you must perceive that you involve them in the same condemnation with us ; a condemnation, which must affect your own christian character more seriously than it possibly can ours. We cannot be much concerned by it, while it includes us among those who, we feel assured, are true christians according to the rules of judging adopted by our saviour, whose prerogative it is to judge his followers. Allow us, for a moment, to call your attention to these rules, which you may not have sufficiently considered.

We have shown you from the gospel what a man must *believe* in order to become entitled to the christian name and privileges ; it is equally clear what he must *be* and *do* in order to possess the christian character. In the sermon on the mount, that body of divinity unmixed with any error, left us by our Lord, this is fully and explicitly laid down. How does this divine discourse open upon us ? What are the elements of christian excellence, which have the promise of peculiar blessings ? Are they matters of opinion, and doctrine, and subtle speculation ? Far from it. They wholly relate to the heart ; to those gentle and pure affections, which all may feel, and cherish, and improve. “ Blessed are the poor in spirit—the meek—the merciful—the peace-makers—the pure in heart—those who hunger and thirst after righteousness.” Such is the foundation of that obedience to Christ, which he makes the test of christian character. *Obedience* to his commands, *doing* the will of God, is the ground of his constant approbation. Who is great in the kingdom of heaven ? Whosoever shall *do* and teach his commandments. Not every one that saith Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven ; but he that *doeth* the will of God. And what is the whole conclusion of these plain, practical, sublime precepts of christian virtue and piety ? He, that heareth these sayings

and *doeth* them, builds his house upon a rock; he, that doeth ~~them~~ not, builds upon the sand.

The same principle, of course, pervades the gospel, and indeed all the scriptures. "Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man.—Whoever, says our saviour, shall *do* the will of my father in heaven, the same is my brother, and sister, and mother. He that hath my commandments and *keepeth* them, he it is that loveth me. He that *doeth* the will of God, says the beloved apostle, abideth forever. Christ being made perfect, says the apostle to the Hebrews, became the author of eternal salvation unto all them that *obey* him. Be ye *doers* of the word, says St. James, and not hearers only. Whoso is a *doer* of the work, this man shall be blessed in his deed. If any man seem religious and bridleth not his tongue, but deceiveth his own heart, this man's religion is vain. Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, to visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep one's self unspotted from the world. The wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, easy to be entreated, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality, and without hypocrisy. And the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace of them that make peace."²⁹

Is not this the religion, too, upon which we must rely in the great day of account with God? So far as our Lord has seen fit to unveil the scenes of that day, what may we judge will be our ground of confidence, our hope of mercy, in appearing before him? "Will it be," to borrow the words of the pious and learned Dr. Barrow, "because we have made goodly professions, been orthodox in our opinions, frequented religious exercises, prayed often and long, kept many fasts, and heard many sermons?" Ah, no! Such is not the foundation of that character, which will bear the test of our Lord's scrutiny. We must have been animated with his spirit, obeyed his divine precepts, and been careful to maintain good works. In that day, deeds of charity and mercy, shown to the humblest of his disciples and followers, will be accepted and regarded as if done to himself. Even a cup of cold water only, given in the name of

a disciple, will in no wise lose its reward. What, then, we may tremblingly ask, must be our reward, if, instead of such acts of christian intercourse and kindness, it shall appear that, relying upon the orthodoxy of our opinions, we have assumed his prerogative of judgment, and condemned some of his sincerest disciples and truest followers, as unworthy to bear his name!

The reflection must have occurred to you, that there may be among christians an apostasy more awful than that of an erroneous faith; an apostasy from the spirit and precepts of Christ. Let us give to this a moment's consideration.

The great and good Dr. Owen, in his discourse on this subject, has given "a few instances of the means and ways whereby a general apostasy from the holy precepts of the gospel, as the rule of our obedience, hath been begun and carried on." Some of his observations deserve our special attention. "That religion," he says, "is alien from the gospel, at least includes a notable defection from it, whose avowed profession does not represent the spirit, graces, and virtues of him who was its author. Yea, conformity unto him in all things is the sum and substance of that obedience which he doth require."

"The Lord Christ hath declared and appointed, that the mutual love of his disciples should be the great testimony of the truth of his doctrine, and the sincerity of their obedience.—His commands and directions unto this purpose are known to all who know the gospel. The blessed effects and fruits of them were eminent for a season among the professors of the gospel, and their mutual love was a convincing argument of the truth, efficacy, and holiness of the doctrine which they did profess.—Some divisions, indeed, happened among the primitive christians, but were quickly healed by the spirit of apostolical authority, and that love which was yet prevalent among them. But afterwards all things grew worse, and the first visible degeneracy of christianity consisted in the strifes, divisions, and contentions of its professors, especially of their leaders."

"Thus was it in the primitive times, which, as it was the first considerable stop unto the progress of the gospel, so it was one principal cause of corrupting the conversations of many, filling

them with a frame of spirit in all things directly opposite unto that of the gospel. The differences with their untoward management, which fell out among the first reformers, was the chief means that hindered their work from an universal success. Is it much otherwise among the strictest sorts of professors at this day? Do not some seem to aim at nothing more than to multiply and increase divisions, and to delight in nothing more than to live and dispute in the flames of them?"

"The most eminent spiritual gifts, with all their effects, either in the souls or lives of them who are made partakers of them, or in the church for edification, will not secure any persons from total apostasy; so also some shall be utterly rejected at the last day, who were able to plead their prophesying and casting out devils in the name of Christ, and that in his name they had done many wondrous works."

"It is not unusual to see persons, who are under the power of some singular opinion and practice in religion, to make one thing almost their whole business; the measure of other things and persons, the rule of communion, and of all sincere love; to value and esteem themselves and others according unto their embracing or not embracing of that opinion. And it were to be wished, that such principles and practices were not visibly accompanied with a decay of love, humility, meekness, self-diffidence, condescension, and zeal in other things; seeing where it is so, let men's outward profession be what it will, the plague of apostasy is begun."*

Long as this quotation is, we could hardly forbear extending it, so excellent are Dr. Owen's remarks upon this subject, so seasonable, too, and so full of instruction to us all. It is as true now as it was in his day, or in the days of the primitive church, that our religion is a religion of love and peace. The spirit of mutual love and charity among its professors is now as convincing an "argument of the truth, efficacy, and holiness of the doctrine which they profess," as it was then. So also "strifes, contentions, and divisions" among them are as great an obstacle

* The Nature of Apostasy, by John Owen, D. D., 1676.

to "the progress of the gospel," as corrupting to "the conversations and spirit" of christians, and as strong proofs of apostasy from the spirit and precepts of Christ. And do they not still too much prevail, even "among the strictest sorts of professors?" Do not some, "especially of our leaders," seem to aim at multiplying divisions and to delight in the heat of them? Is it unusual, at the present day, for christian professors to make some favorite opinion "the rule of communion and all sincere love," to value themselves upon it, and "esteem others according as they embrace that opinion or not?" Is not this, too, accompanied with a decay of love, humility, meekness, and self-diffidence, which proves that "the plague of apostasy is begun?" And will the most eminent spiritual gifts now "secure any persons from total apostasy?"

These observations of Dr. Owen, therefore, ought to sink deep into our minds and hearts. The apostasy which he so clearly points out, the guilt of which we may unwarily incur while we are charging others with apostasy from the faith, should fill us with dread, as the great moral evil to which christians are ever exposed, and which they should most anxiously avoid. To succeed in avoiding, or subduing it, we must begin at its source, and resist its first motions. The sin which leads to it most easily besets us, and gains strength with every indulgence. Censorious judging in matters of faith and conscience, is the source from which it springs. This leads directly to that dividing, exclusive, and bitter spirit among christians, which is itself "the plague of apostasy."

"To judge other men's consciences," says the truly excellent Howe, "is of so near akin to governing them, that they who can allow themselves to do the former, want only power, not will or inclination, to offer at the other too." When, therefore, we once allow ourselves to judge the consciences of our brethren, we feel a strong desire to control them, and if this cannot be done directly, we attempt to do it by indirect means. Hence proceed exclusions, divisions, contentions, animosities, revilings, and all those disgraceful and calamitous consequences, which the professed followers of the meek and lowly Jesus, by thus apostatiz-

ing from his spirit and precepts, have brought upon themselves, upon mankind, and upon the christian cause. Let us then look at the fountain head of these bitter waters, and stay them at their source. Let us refrain from judging one another. "One would think," says the pious author just quoted, "it is the easiest thing in the world *not to do*, especially not to do a thing of itself ungrateful to a well tempered mind, and a great privilege not to be obliged to judge another man's conscience and practice, when it is so easy to misjudge and do wrong."*

The pious Matthew Henry, whom many of you must regard with affectionate veneration, has some remarks on this subject which cannot fail to influence your minds. "Christ," he says, "is the sovereign of the heart, the rightful sovereign; for him the throne is to be reserved; conscience is his deputy; by him it is to be commanded, and to him it is accountable."

"It is a good reason why we should not judge one another, or be severe in our censures one of another; we thereby invade Christ's throne, for it is his prerogative to call his disciples to account; and though he designed them to be one another's helpers, he never intended they should be one another's judges."

"Judging the heart is, in my eye, one of the most uncharitable species of judging; censuring the principles and ends of an action, which are secret; charging those that differ from us with hypocrisy, which is a heart-sin. If the shows be good, and the outside be justifiable, when we conclude hypocrisy is in the heart, we step into the throne of God."†

Do we not incur the guilt of this most uncharitable species of judging, when we deny the christian name and character to the professed followers of Christ, who, equally with us, obey his commands, observe his ordinances, maintain the public worship of God, and devote of their worldly substance to the promotion of our holy religion? Can we, with impunity before God, while we acknowledge their learning and competency to understand the scriptures, charge them with preaching not the true gospel, when they study to preach that purely, and nothing else; or

* On Union among Protestants.

† Henry's Works, p. 663.

with a dereliction from the essential doctrines of christianity, with renouncing the faith once delivered to the saints, when they profess to cling to these, and to these alone, unmixed with human errors or additions?

Is not this to charge them with "a heart sin?" Is it not to "step into the throne of God?" And can we, by such usurped authority, alter their relation to us or to our common master? Can we avoid the obligation to love and treat them as christian brethren, by cutting them off from the christian family? Might we not as well think of avoiding the duty of almsgiving, by destroying the objects of our charity? Is it not entirely mistaking the province of our own conscience, when we thus take oversight of the hearts and consciences of others? As you find declared in Henry's Commentary, "they are not accountable *to us*, nor are we accountable *for them*. If we can be helpers of their joy, it is well; but we have no dominion over their faith. In judging and censuring our brethren, we meddle with that which doth not belong to us. We have work enough to do at home; and if we must needs be judging, let us exercise our faculty upon our own hearts and ways."* Can any thing but evil proceed from thus interfering with the most sacred rights of others? Does it not work evil to our neighbor, evil to the community in which we live, evil to the cause of Christ, evil to our own souls, evil now, and evil forever? Can it possibly come in aid of truth, or love, or peace, or joy, or any of the ends of christianity? Is it not essentially and eternally opposed to them all?

These are important inquiries, and you may justly think that they deserve to be pursued with further illustrations from the same class of venerated authors, to whom we are already so greatly indebted. This might be done to any extent, for these authors abound in sentiments promotive of the true spirit and ends of christianity. We might say of most of them, what Dr. Marsh, the editor of *Select Works of Howe and Bates*, applies to the former of these, that their "general views of religion were, in the highest and best sense, liberal and rational;" that

* Exposition, Rom. 14.

they “considered christianity, not so much a system of opinions, and a set of forms, as a divine discipline for the heart and life;” and that they were “firm and constant supporters of generous and catholic principles.” But we must now hasten to a conclusion of our observations, and can add only a few of the passages which have occurred to us as pertinent and useful in connexion with these inquiries.

We begin with Dr. Evans, an excellent orthodox preacher among the English dissenters, and the “worthy friend” of Watts, who, with Doddridge, thought his ‘Christian Temper’ one of the best works of the kind in our language. In this work, alluding to the apostle’s discourse about judging one another, Dr. Evans says: “In such matters every man is to give account of himself to God, but men have no right to call one another to account; therefore, to judge another in those things, is to thrust ourselves into God’s province. And will not God, think you, chastise such arrogance? It is also very injurious to our neighbor. Evil surmises of him weaken our own affection; and, if we spread them abroad, may lessen his reputation with others, and draw many pernicious consequences after them; for which we shall be justly accountable, as long as they spring from a sinful action of ours, and such effects might be foreseen likely to ensue.”

“The charity of some, like that of the Jews of old, is confined to those of their own way; and so they give themselves an unconscionable liberty to expose and blacken other people. This party zeal has in every age been the foundation of the greatest excesses. Whereas, if we would but enlarge the community of love, as our master has taught us to do, to all mankind; and our brotherly love to all that ‘hold the head,’ this would extinguish the desire of censure.”

“The way of peace among christians seems to be plainly declared in the gospel.—Not by pretending to bring all christians to a perfect uniformity of sentiments or practice in matters of religion. That was not in the apostolical days themselves; nor can be hoped for till we come to heaven. Nor by arbitrary forms of agreement devised by men and prescribed by some to

others. There was more of the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace during the primitive times, before ever such methods were invented, than since the christian world has abounded with them. And if they had been thought necessary, certainly he that was faithful in all God's house, would, either in person or by his apostles, have recommended them to the use of the church.—One would think that now, when the canon of scripture is completed, we should be ready to own all them our fellow christians, who own the same sacred books as we do, for the only and perfect rule of christian faith and practice. Though they and we should differ in understanding many particulars contained in that rule ; yet, if we judge them ' weak in the faith,' we are directed to receive them, but not to doubtful disputations."

" If our judgment be not so good, or our capacities not so enlarged as our neighbors' ; yet we are obliged to make the best of them, and to judge for ourselves.—Nor can any persuasion or practice, how agreeable soever it may be in itself to the rule, be a faith that gives glory to God, or the obedience of faith, which is not the fruit of honest and impartial inquiry into the mind of God. Indeed, it is not the homage of a reasonable creature or of a christian ; but a rash and bold adventure, that shows little of a conscientious concern whether we be right or wrong, and might have happened the one way as well as the other."

" To be zealous for we know not what, is as bad as to worship we know not what. And however positive and confident we may be, after all our warmth, we may be on the wrong side, if our assurance be not the result of a sincere and impartial inquiry."

The pious and judicious Henry will show you in what spirit of candor and equity we ought to conduct all our religious inquiries and disputes. " In matters of doubtful disputation," he says, " while we are contending for that which we take to be right, let us at the same time think it possible that we may be in the wrong. When we contend for the great principles of religion, in which all good christians are agreed, we need not fear our being in a mistake, they are of undoubted certainty, we know and are assured that Jesus is the Christ. But there are

many things which are not so clearly revealed, because of not so much moment, in which the truth indeed lies but on one side, and yet wise and good men are not agreed on which side it lies. Here, though we both argue and act according to the light that God has given us, yet we must not be over confident of our judgment, as if wisdom must die with us. Others have understanding as well as we, and are not inferior to us; nay, perhaps they every way excel us, and therefore who can tell but they may be in the right?"*

In recommending the same spirit, another eminent old orthodox divine declares: "This I say, and I say it with much integrity; I never yet took up religion by parties in the lump. I have found by trial of things that there is some truth on all sides: I have found holiness where you would little think it, and so likewise truth. And I have learned this principle, which I hope I shall never lay down till I am swallowed up of immortality; and that is, to acknowledge every good thing, and hold communion with it, in men, in churches, or whatsoever else. I learn this from Paul, I learn this from Jesus Christ himself."†

The tendency of an opposite course is stated by Baxter, in his usual plain and direct manner. "When men are incorporated into a sect or uncharitable party, and have captivated themselves to a human servitude in religion, and given up themselves to the will of men, the stream will bear down the plainest evidence, and carry them to the foulest errors.—The interest of christianity, catholicism and charity is contrary to the interest of sects, as such. And it is the nature of a sectary, that he preferreth the interest of his opinion, sect, or party, before the interest of christianity, catholicism and charity, and will sacrifice the latter to the service of the former."‡

From the following observations of the learned Grove, an intimate friend of Watts, whom in the opinion of Doddridge he resembled as a writer, you may learn how dangerous it is to rely

* Henry's Works, p. 480. † Dr. T. Goodwin's Sermons, p. 488.

‡ Life of Baxter, fol. part 2, p. 144.

upon our conscience to justify us in such conduct, or in any uncharitable treatment of others.

“God hath endowed every man to whom he hath given a common measure of reason, with a capacity of judging concerning those things on which his religious conduct, and in consequence of that his happiness depends; and a capacity, in this case, infers a right, and a right an obligation, without being accountable to any but God himself for the use of it, unless where it interferes with the common rights of mankind. It is the gift of God, not of my fellow creatures, who have therefore no just pretence to disturb me in the enjoyment of it. God alone is judge of the degree of my capacity, and of my integrity in the application and improvement I make of it; and to him alone I am to answer for my management.”

“Though conscience is our immediate rule, yet the rule of conscience is truth, as God hath manifested it to us in his word, or by the reason and nature of things, and we are capable of apprehending it; and by this external rule, or the truth, as discoverable by us, we are to be judged in the last day. This is a matter of such importance, that every one will do well to reflect seriously upon it, that he be not too precipitate in forming his judgment of opinions, and of the persons who hold them. For what if I should err in my judgment, and in my practice as consequent upon that judgment, spending my zeal upon things that are no part of christianity, perhaps of a very opposite nature, and treating those as unworthy of christian fellowship, and hardly objects of common charity, who are really an honor to their profession? It will be a poor excuse that I did but what my conscience told me was my duty to do, since I ought to have taken care to inform my conscience better.”*

An eminent divine of the English church has demonstrated the innocency of involuntary errors; and that in respect to those which are voluntary, we are accountable not to man, but to our final Judge for neglecting the means in our power of learning the truth. How deeply then does it concern us all, before we

* Grove's Works, v. 8, 148, 155.

presume to denounce our brethren for their religious opinions or practices, to examine impartially the evidence and arguments which they offer in support of them !

“The only punishable errors,” says Dr. Sykes, in his tract on this subject, “are such as are voluntary, and proceed from negligence ; and in this case too, to speak properly, it is the negligence, and not the error which is punishable.—The crime consists in the negligence of such as are betrayed into error ; which negligence is more or less punishable, as the will of God has been plainer or more discoverable by men. Punishable, I say, but not by man, unless the errors betray them into such acts as are inconsistent with the civil interests of mankind. For since the fault lies only in negligence, what man alive can tell what industry, pains or labor has been used to attain the truth ? God the searcher of hearts can easily discover this.”

To judge for another in religion is as impossible, according to the great Dr. Clarke, “as that any one man should see or taste, live or breathe for another.—The only rule of faith to every christian,” he says, “is the doctrine of Christ ; and that doctrine, as applied to him by his own understanding. In which matter, to preserve his understanding from erring, he is obliged indeed, at his utmost peril, to lay aside all vice and all prejudice, and to make use of the best assistances he can procure. But after he has done all that can be done, he must of necessity at last understand with his own understanding, and believe with his own, not another’s faith.”*

Hence every evil inflicted upon a fellow christian on account of his faith is stamped with absurdity, as well as injustice and persecution.

“Every one,” says Dr. Gale, “naturally and necessarily believes his own opinions and sentiments to be true.—We cannot forbear judging as the evidence appears to us, any more than we can with our eyes wide open, and in the face of the sun at noon, judge it to be midnight. And therefore if men, upon account of any different sentiments, give us severe and unkind language,

* Clarke’s Works, fol. v. 4, p. 1.

fix upon us any ungrateful appellations, or stigmatize us with the reproachful titles of heretics, schismatics or any odious party names ; we can very readily see and complain of the injustice and ill usage ; and are apt enough to say, and with good reason too, who art thou that judgest another's servant ? But how then can any of us be guilty of the same crime ? To treat others in this manner is to stand self-condemned, and render ourselves properly heretics in the scripture sense, according to St. Paul's description of them."

"To what has a man a greater right, than to the entire free enjoyment and direction of his own conscience ; and to a full power to act uprightly, and in sincerity before God and man ? And yet men are not by far so much disturbed and wronged in any other possessions and enjoyments, as in these.—What is more common, than to see men assume to themselves that extravagant power, not given to any, to prescribe to, direct, and force the consciences of others, and rob them of their peace and purity, or else of their religious rights and privileges, by depriving them of that society and communion which they claim and desire, but cannot purchase at so dear a rate ? All the difficulties and hardships, of every kind and in every degree, which are brought upon persons on the score of religion, come properly under the name of persecution, and are all equally founded in oppression, violence, and injustice."*

The pious and orthodox Orton has, with no less force than brevity, expressed his sense of this kind of injustice, in his 'Letters to a Young Clergyman.' "Whether a man," he observes, "will be condemned hereafter for preaching and thinking differently from me may be doubtful, and is an affair in which I have nothing to do. But I am sure, a man will be condemned for a bitter, uncharitable and censorious spirit, if I understand the terms of salvation, as laid down in the gospel.—A highwayman robs me of my purse ; and there is an end perhaps of the business, of his oaths, and his injustice to me. A christian brother robs me of my esteem, reputation, peace, comfort, and

* Gale's Sermons, v. 4, p. 425.

usefulness ; and at the same time lifts up his hands and eyes to heaven, and seems to say, ‘ Let the Lord be glorified.’ ”*

The celebrated Wesley, too, has given his views of such injustice among christians, in the following characteristic manner : “ Are you persuaded you see more clearly than I ? It is not unlikely that you may. Then, treat me, as you would desire to be treated yourself upon a change of circumstances. Point me out a better way than I have yet known. Show me it is so, by plain proof of scripture. And if I linger in the path I have been accustomed to tread, and therefore am unwilling to leave it, labor with me a little, take me by the hand, and lead me as I am able to bear. But be not displeased if I entreat you not to beat me down, in order to quicken my pace. I can go but feebly and slowly at best ; then, I should not be able to go at all. May I not request of you further, not to give me hard names, in order to bring me into the right way. Suppose I were ever so much in the wrong, I doubt this would not set me right. Rather it would make me run so much the farther from you, and so get more and more out of the way. Nay, perhaps, if you are angry, so shall I be too ; and then there will be small hopes of finding the truth. If once anger arise, this smoke will so dim the eyes of my soul, that I shall be able to see nothing clearly.—If we could discern truth—would it not be loss, rather than gain ? For, how far is love, even with many wrong opinions, to be preferred before truth itself without love ? ”†

But perhaps we cannot find, in the whole circle of orthodox writers, a more faithful instructor on this subject than Dr. Watts. “ The iniquity of uncharitableness,” says this truly christian divine, “ has more springs, than there are streams or branches belonging to the great river of Egypt ; and it is as fruitful of serpents and monsters too.” Many of these springs he has traced out, and exposed them to open view. Sometimes this iniquity, he observes, proceeds “ from a malicious constitution of nature, an acrimonious or a choleric temper of blood.” To suppress the angry motions of such a temper, “ is a work of toil,

* Vol. 1, p. 208.

† Works, v. 5, p. 5.

and difficulty, perpetual watchfulness and unceasing prayer." Sometimes it springs from "self-love, and pride, and a vain conceit of our own opinions." Hence a man, "who is almost always in the wrong," will be prompt "in pronouncing error and heresy upon every notion and practice, that differs from his own. He takes the freedom to choose a religion for himself, but he allows no man besides the same liberty. He is sure that he has reason to dissent from others, but no man has reason to dissent from him."

Sometimes "this hateful vice is derived from a constant and friendly acquaintance with the men and books of our own opinion, and an avoidance of all the writers and persons that differ from us." He who "never looks abroad beyond the clan of his own fraternity—who reads the controversies as they are described only by one party, and disputes them over only in the books that are written on one side—finds a great appearance of argument and scripture there, and then proclaims it impossible, that the adverse party should show equal reason and revelation. And thus he proceeds to censure them as men of corrupt minds, reprobate concerning the faith, and twisting the scriptures to their own damnation."

"A fourth spring of uncharitableness is, our reading the word of God with a whole set of notions established beforehand. And yet how common a method, and how constant is this?"—There are "many terms and expressions in scripture, to which men have unalterably fixed their several different ideas, and raised consequences from them, and interpret the word of God by them, without inquiring whether their ideas are conformable to the sense in which scripture uses those expressions.—Each triumphs in his own sentiments, and pronounces the apostles and prophets of his side. Then he lets fly many a sharp invective against all the men that presume to oppose him; for in his sense they oppose the apostles themselves and fight against the authority of God."

"Another cause of uncharitableness is a want of reflection on the grounds of our own opinions. We should be more just to ourselves, and more gentle to others, if we did but impartially

review the reasons why we first embraced our several principles and practices. Perhaps it was education determined most of them ; then let us chide ourselves severely for building upon so careless and slight a bottom ; or let us be civil to the greatest part of mankind, who came to all their principles the same way. Perhaps we were led into particular notions by the authority of persons whom we reverence or love ; then we should not upbraid our neighbors, that have been influenced into different sentiments by the same springs. Perhaps we have felt interest sometimes ready to bias our thoughts, and give us a secret inclination or aversion to a party ; let us then pity the frailty of human nature, and have compassion upon men whose judgments are exposed to so mean a bribery, and sometimes have been warped aside from the truth. Or finally, perhaps deep meditation, a daily search into scripture, and fervent prayer were the methods by which we pursued knowledge, and established our principles upon solid reason. Let us then be so charitable to those whom we contend with, as to suppose they sought after truth the same way."

"The true reason why we kindle our anger against our christian brethren that are not entirely of our party is, because we not only have the vanity to fancy ourselves always in the right, and them in the wrong ; but we judge their consciences and their sincerity too, that they did not come honestly and fairly by their principles, while we never consider how we ourselves came by our own."

Thus this ardent advocate of "orthodoxy and charity united" proceeds to examine into other sources of this unchristian spirit ; such as perverting "the principles of those that dissent from us," so as to "be sure to find some terrible absurdity at the end of them ;" making "every punctilio of our own scheme a fundamental point ;" seeking "the applause of a party, and the advance of self-interest ;" and "fixing upon some necessary and special point in christianity, and setting it up in opposition to the rest." And finally he mentions as the most common cause of uncharitableness, "that a great part of the professors of our holy religion make their heads the chief seat of it, and scarce ever

suffer it to descend and warm their hearts.—While they boast of their orthodox faith they forget their christian love.”

But Dr. Watts instructs us by his example still more than by his precepts. He was as anxious to preserve in his own breast the sacred flame of charity as to kindle it in others. To this end, by his own account, he studied and labored, watched and prayed. “I confess,” says he, “now and then some opinions, or some unhappy occurrences are ready to narrow and confine my affections again, if I am not watchful over myself, but I pray to God to preserve upon my heart a lasting remembrance of those days and those studies, whereby he laid within me the foundation of so broad a charity.” If we will labor, like him, for this crowning grace of the christian life, we may be sure to enjoy, as he did, the delightful persuasion that christians of widely different opinions may be equally sincere, and that many of them may travel abreast in the road to heaven. “Though they do not trace precisely the same track, yet all look to the same saviour Jesus, and all arrive at the same common salvation. And though their names may be crossed out of the records of a particular church on earth, where charity fails, yet they will be found written in the Lamb’s book of life, which is a record of eternal love, and shall forever be joined to the fellowship of the catholic church in heaven.”*

Dr. Blair, in his admirable discourse on Candor, has shown us how vigilant even good men ought to be against the growth of an uncharitable spirit, and what aggravated evils may arise from the least indulgence of a disposition to censorious judging. A little cloud of prejudice in the mind, if not dissipated, may swell into a tempest.

“It often happens,” says this celebrated divine, “that the laudable attachment which we contract for the country, or the church, to which we belong, both confines our affections within too narrow a sphere, and gives rise to violent prejudices against such as come under an opposite description. Not content with being in the right ourselves, we must find all others in the wrong.

* Collection of Tracts by J. Sparks, vol. 6, Isaac Watts.

We claim an exclusive possession of goodness and wisdom ; and from approving warmly of those who join us, we proceed to condemn, with much acrimony, not the principles only, but the characters of those from whom we differ. Hence persons of well disposed minds are too often, through the strength of partial good affections, involved in the crime of uncharitable judgment."

"Religion is always found to heighten every passion on which it acts, and to render every contest into which it enters, uncommonly ardent ; because the objects which it presents are of such a nature as strongly to seize and engage the human mind. When zeal for their own principles has prompted men to view those of a different persuasion in the odious lights which bigotry suggests, every sentiment of humanity has too often been extinguished.—No one can tell how far uncharitable prejudices may carry him in guilt, if he allows them to harbor and gather strength in his breast. The cloud which ' rose from the sea, no bigger than a man's hand,' may soon swell and spread, till it cover the whole horizon, and discharge with most destructive violence the gathered storm."*

"The crime of uncharitable judgment" among Christians, like that of idolatry among the Jews, has been justly considered as apostasy from the spirit of their religion, because it is so opposite and fatal to it in its nature and effects. Our religion is preeminently a religion of love. "Christianity," as is beautifully expressed by a distinguished divine before referred to, "has enjoined a love as extensive as the light of the sun, and as active as its heat.—A love so extensive was fit to be enjoined by that Being, who is love itself."† The late learned Dr. Emmons, who doubtless shared your highest confidence, has also described in a striking manner this divine character of our religion. "It is true," says he, speaking of christians, "they are regenerated, but regeneration consists in love ; they are sanctified, but sanctification consists in love ; they have a new heart, but a new heart consists in love ; they have new knowledge, but their new knowledge consists in love ; they have new

* Sermons, v. 2, p. 292.

† Sead's Discourses, v. 2, p. 186.

joys, new hopes, new peace, but all these arise from love.”*

“Nothing, indeed,” says another eminent orthodox divine, referring to the spirit of uncharitableness, “is more opposite to the true genius of christianity, or the example and practice of its great author; whose gentleness and meekness were never to be exhausted by the most injurious actions; much less by involuntary failings and invincible mistakes. Whenever we find his zeal exerted in sharp admonitions and warm reproofs, we are sure there is real guilt, and that of the worst sort. But opinions and judgments simply erroneous never offended him; and we may safely say never will.”†

It is with peculiar propriety, therefore, that love to one another, and sincerity in their religious faith and profession, are represented as the great and essential characteristics of christians.

“There is no one point of our religion,” says archbishop Sharp, “more necessary to be daily preached, to be earnestly pressed and insisted on, than that of peace, and love, and unity.—What the worship of one God was to the Jews, that peace, and love, and unity, is to the Christians, even the great distinguishing law and character of their profession. And to the shame of christians it may be spoken, there is no one commandment in all Christ’s religion, that hath been so generally and so scandalously violated among his followers, as this.”

“It were heartily to be wished, that christians would consider, that the articles of faith, those things that God hath made necessary by every one to be believed in order to his salvation, are but very few; and they are all of them so plainly and clearly set down in the scripture, that it is impossible for any sincere honest minded man to miss of the true sense of them; and they have farther this badge, to distinguish them from all other truths, that they have an immediate influence upon men’s lives, a direct tendency to make men better.”

“Let us quit ourselves of all our prepossessions; let us morti-

*Sermons p. 299. † Dr. Balguy on Diversity of Opinion, &c.

fy all our pride and vain glory, our passion and emulation, our covetousness and revenge, and bring nothing to our debates about religion, but the pure love of truth.—He that comes thus qualified to the study of religion, though he may not always light on the truth, yet with all his errors, be they what they will, he is more acceptable to God, than the man that hath truth on his side, yet takes it up or maintains it to serve a turn. He that believes a falsehood, after he hath used his sincere endeavors to find the truth, is not half so much a heretic as he that professeth a truth out of evil principles, and prostituteth it to unworthy ends.”*

“He that inquires after truth,” says another of the distinguished authors already referred to, “is in a better condition though he misses it, than one who comes into possession of it by accident.—When will men learn to make sincerity the only test of religion? Not to be too forward and positive in determining against the sincerity of their fellow christians, where there is no other evidence of the want of it, than their not acknowledging the truth or importance of every favorite notion of theirs? And leave the punishment even of insincerity to the proper person and time?—This I understand by sincerity, even such a love of the truth, as engages men to search for it as for hid treasure, and having found it, to lay it up in their hearts, and to practise in all things agreeable to it; or, in other words, a constant endeavor to know and do the will of God. This I will venture to say, is the only necessary qualification of a faithful subject in the kingdom of Christ.”†

“Ensure your own salvation as much as you can,” says the excellent Seed, “but do not think hardly of those who differ from you even in fundamental points, much less consign them to damnation. Our blessed saviour, who disapproved the worship of the Samaritans, as appears from his conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well, yet singles out, in his beautiful parable, one of that nation to do a generous action to the wounded traveller, on purpose, one would think, to obviate this

* Discourse on Church Communion. †Grove's Works, v. 2, p. 131.

contracted turn of mind, and to recommend those to our love, whose religious notions we dislike.—‘Can any thing good come out of Nazareth?’ was a low, confined, ungenerous thought. Goodness is not limited to, or excluded from, any place; the good are diffused throughout all nations, all sects, all persuasions, all ranks and orders of men.—In short, true charity is to detest nothing but vice; and to despise nothing but contracted, illiberal notions, which would confine God’s favor, and most certainly limit our affections, within a narrow circle.”*

The same enlarged view of christian love is presented by Howe, the admired old divine, whom we have so repeatedly commended to you; who also describes with much force the absurdity, arrogance, and impiety, which they are guilty of who set themselves up as judges over the consciences of others.

“To limit our christian love to a party of christians, truly so called,” he says, “is so far from serving the purpose to be aimed at, that it resists and defeats it; and instead of a preservative union, infers most destructive divisions.—It is to love factiously, and with an unjust love, that refuses to give indifferently to every one his due. For is there no love due to a disciple of Christ ‘in the name of a disciple?’ It is founded in a falsehood, and denies them to be of the christian community who are really so. It presumes to remove the ancient landmarks, not civil, but sacred, and draws on, not the people’s curse only, but that of God also.”

“If I can contribute no way else to union, from this holy dictate and law of the spirit of love, I can at least abstain from censuring my fellow christians.—Most of all when the matter wherein I presume to sit in judgment upon another is of so high a nature, as the posture of his heart God-ward; a matter peculiarly belonging to another tribunal of divine cognizance. And if I would take upon me to conclude a man insincere, and an hypocrite, only because he is not of my mind in these smaller things that are controverted among us, how would I form my argument? ‘No one can, with sincerity, differ from that man,

* Seed’s Discourses, v. 2, p. 80.

whose understanding is so good and clear as to apprehend all things, with absolute certainty, just as they are.' And go on to assume, and a strange assuming it must be, 'but *my* understanding is so good and clear as' &c. It is hard to say whether the uncharitableness of the one assertion, or the arrogance of the other, is the greater; and whether both be more immoral, or absurd. But the impiety is worst of all; for how insolently doth such a man take upon him to make a new gospel, and other terms of salvation than God hath made; when *his* sentiments and determinations of things, which God hath never made necessary, must be the measure and rule of life and death unto men."*

Such were the reflections of this puritan divine. The following remarks of a learned contemporary, who attained to the highest dignity in the established church, inculcate the same spirit, besides suggesting an important rule in ascertaining what is "the faith which was once delivered to the saints."

"Christianity," says archbishop Wake, "commands us to love our enemies, and sure then we cannot but think it very highly reasonable not to hate our brethren; but especially on such an account as, if it once be admitted, will, in this divided state of the church, drive the very name of brotherly love and charity out of it; seeing, by whatsoever arguments we go about to justify our uncharitableness to any others, they will all equally warrant them to withhold in like manner their charity from us. There is no honest sincere christian, how erroneous soever he may be, but what at least is persuaded that he is in the right, and looks upon us to be as far from the truth, by differing from him, as we esteem him for not agreeing with us. Now if, upon the sole account of such differences, it be lawful for us to hate another, we must for the very same reason allow it to be as lawful for him also to hate us. Thus shall we at once invert the characteristic of our religion, 'By this shall men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another;' and turn it into the contrary note; while we make our hatred to our bro-

* Union among Protestants.

ther the great mark of our zeal for our religion, and conclude him to love Christ the most, who the least loves his fellow christians.”

“The faith once delivered to the saints, is that which the holy apostles had once for all instructed them in; and which, therefore, both they and all succeeding ages in the church were faithfully to retain and earnestly to contend for. It is not the faith of this or that church or party; it is not the faith of this or that country or century. Let men and time make what alterations they please in it; the faith once delivered to the saints, is what we are to contend for, not for any inventions or additions of men that have since been brought into it.”*

“As it is self evident,” says a learned Scotch divine, “that the true interest and real honor of a christian church can only be promoted by a steady regard to the laws and institutions of Christ, the alone king and head of it, we should do well to take care that the doctrines for which we contend, be the faith which was once delivered to the saints, and not ‘the doctrines and commandments of men,’ lest when we appear for God, we be found to fight against him, and overthrow that very church which we mean to establish.”†

You will now be gratified to receive the views of the most admired of the modern orthodox divines, who will lead you at once to the fountain head of truth and love.

“As I have loved you, ye ought also to love one another,” is the direction of our saviour; “whence,” observes Robert Hall, “it is evident, that the pattern we are to follow, is the love which Christ bore to his church, which is undoubtedly extended indiscriminately to every member. The cultivation of this disposition is affirmed to be one of the most essential objects of the christian revelation, as well as the most precious fruit of that faith by which it is embraced. ‘Seeing,’ says St. Peter, ‘ye have purified your hearts by obeying the truth with an unfeigned love of the brethren, see that ye love one another with a pure heart

* Sermons and Discourses, p. 192.

† Dr. Webster—Sermon before Gen. Assembly, 1754.

servently. Agreeably to which, the beloved disciple affirms it to be the chief evidence of our being in a state of grace and salvation. ‘By this we know that we have passed from death unto life, because we love the brethren.’ Let it also be remembered, that the mode in which we are commanded to exhibit and express this most eminent grace of the spirit, is the preservation of union, a careful avoidance of every temper and practice which might produce alienation and division.”

“In the last prayer our saviour uttered, in which he expressly includes all who should hereafter believe, he earnestly intreats that they may be all one, even as he and his father were one, that the world might be furnished with a convincing evidence of his mission. For some ages the object of that prayer was realized, in the harmony which prevailed among christians, whose religion was a bond of union more strict and tender than the ties of consanguinity; and with the appellation of brethren, they associated all the sentiments of endearment that relation implied.”

“But to refuse the communion of sincere christians, is not a natural expression of christian love, but so diametrically opposite, that we may fairly put it to the conscience of those who contend for such a measure, whether they find it possible to carry it into execution without an inward struggle, without feeling emotions of sorrow and concern. It is to inflict a wound on the very heart of charity, for no fault, for none at least of which the offender is conscious, for none which such treatment has the remotest tendency to correct; and if this is not being guilty of ‘beating our fellow servant,’ we must despair of ascertaining the meaning of terms.”*

“When will the time arrive,” says the same admired author, “when the disciples of Christ shall cordially join hand and heart with all who ‘hold the head,’ and no other terms of communion be insisted upon in any church but what are necessary to constitute a real christian? The departure from a principle so directly resulting from the genius of christianity, and so evidently inculcated and implied in the sacred scriptures, has, in my ap-

* Terms of Communion.

prehension, been productive of infinite mischief; nor is there room to anticipate the period of the universal diffusion and triumph of the christian religion, but in consequence of its being completely renounced and abandoned. What can be more repugnant to the beautiful idea which our saviour gives us of his church, as one fold under one shepherd, than the present aspect of christendom, split into separate and hostile communions frowning defiance on each other, when each erects itself upon party principles, and selects its respective watchword of contention, as though the epithet of militant, when applied to the church, were designed to announce, not a state of conflict with the powers of darkness, but of irreconcilable intestine warfare and opposition.”*

Here, you may think, we might properly close our observations on this subject; but we cannot forbear to add a few passages from the works of Dr. Barrow and Dr. Balguy, two eminent orthodox divines of the English church, who have described with great truth and energy the evil nature and effects of uncharitable judging among christians. Their remarks will not be unacceptable, though some of them should seem but a repetition of what has been already presented to you. “Repetition is not always tautology,” especially when it gives us the thoughts of various gifted minds.

“By taking upon ourselves to judge unduly,” says Dr. Barrow, “we do invade God’s office, setting up ourselves as judges in his room; we usurp his right, exercising jurisdiction over his subjects, without order and license from him. It is St. Paul’s argument, ‘Who art thou that judgest another’s servant?’ That is, how intolerably bold and arrogant, how sacrilegiously injurious and profane art thou, to climb up into God’s tribunal, and thence to pronounce doom upon his subjects?”

“By rash judgment in matters not subject to our cognizance, we proudly and perversely do arrogate to ourselves the incommunicable perfections of God, who alone can know such things, and determine rightly in such cases; who therefore hath reserv-

*Preface to Discourse at Ordination of Robertson, 1811.

ed them to himself, commanding us to ‘judge nothing before the time, until the Lord come.’ By passing sentence about the state of our neighbor, we do anticipate God’s judgment, and by prejudging strive to frustrate it. We take upon us to ‘purge his floor,’ to sever the chaff from the corn, and the tares from the wheat, to discriminate the goats from the sheep; which to perform will be the work of God’s infinite wisdom and justice at the great day.”

“In fine, censuring is impious, as involving the violation of those great commandments, of exercising, in all our demeanor and dealing, humility, meekness, pity and mercy toward our brethren; of pursuing and promoting peace among them. It is unjust to meddle in affairs with which we have nothing to do; to draw those persons under our jurisdiction who are not subject to it, but are liable to render their account at another bar; to punish those in their reputation or interest, over whom we have no just authority, who have their own master to whom they must stand or fall.”*

“We are offended at our brethren,” observes Dr. Balguy, “think and speak ill of them, and practise hostilities against them. Why, what have they done? They have, it seems, presumed to differ from us in opinion, and followed their own judgment instead of ours. Does this reason deserve the name of a reason? Is it not rather a most ridiculous pretence, and does it not appear so at first sight? Let us inquire into the true cause of this proceeding. Is it owing to our love of truth and our zeal and concern for the support of it? No; for such a principle, if sincere, would make us behave quite the reverse.—Surely, if we would recommend our opinions effectually, we must procure them a fair hearing, and appear well affected towards those whom we would convince.

“Can it, then, be any way referred to a pious concern for the glory of God? May we suppose that men are impatient of opposition, and zealous for their opinions from a strict regard for the doctrines of religion, in order to preserve them in their

* Barrow’s Sermons, v. 1, p. 448.

original purity? However this may be alleged, it seems very difficult to find the connexion.—Will animosity or reproaches have a better effect than argument and fair reasoning? If we judge that our neighbor has erred and strayed from the paths of truth;—will our treating him angrily or scornfully make him more attentive to instruction, or more open to conviction?—As ‘the wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God,’ so it is the most improper instrument in the world for the maintenance of truth.

“Since then the behavior we are speaking of is not to be accounted for by the forementioned suppositions, to what cause may it be justly ascribed? To none, I fear, that is praiseworthy or even innocent.—For, in truth, it springs from pride, vanity, and immoderate self-love. Nothing else is sufficient to account for it, or capable of producing it. Being swelled with a high conceit of our own opinions, because they are our own, our attachment to them becomes so strong, that every opposition is apt to give us pain, and become an object of our displeasure. We look upon it as an offence, and too often resent it accordingly.”

“Do we pretend to set up our sentiments as a common standard? Or would we, in resemblance of a noted tyrant, reduce all men’s understandings to the model and measure of our own? If we presume that we are in the right, and others in the wrong, what hinders them from making the same supposition in favor of themselves? And whether it is made by the one or the other, assurance and confidence are by no means certain marks of truth.”

“The practice here complained of may be considered as producing evils of the highest malignity. To this have been owing most of the calamities which have often so cruelly infested the christian world.—The chief blessings of society it has corrupted and poisoned; it has robbed men of their mutual affection, benevolence, and esteem; infused jealousies, kindled contentions, and spread variance and discord far and wide; it has divided friends, families, kindred; crumbled communities into parties and factions; and burst asunder the strongest obligations, both

natural, civil and religious. It perverts men's understandings, corrupts their judgments, and alienates their affections ; it confounds their ideas of merit and demerit, and makes them estimate characters by false rules and fallacious measures ; it creates uneasy sentiments, productive of ill-will ; it nourishes presumption, confidence, and self-conceit ; and destroys the kind instincts of humanity and compassion."

"If then we have any regard to plain reason, and natural equity ; if we wish peace and prosperity, either to our fellow creatures or ourselves ; if we have any concern for the glory of God and the honor of his dispensations, let us not presume to exercise dominion over other men's faith, or take any steps towards oppressing their understandings or impairing their liberties. Let the love of equity and probity prevail in our minds, and let us cherish sobriety of thought and humility of spirit. Above all, let us put on charity, which is the bond of perfectness, the end of the commandment, and the very essence of the gospel."*

"It is strange to astonishment," exclaims Dr. Bates, in his funeral discourse upon his friend Baxter, whom he represents as an ardent promoter of peace and union among his fellow christians, and one who would as willingly have been 'a martyr for love as for any article of the creed' ; "it is strange to astonishment, that those who agree in the substantial and great points of the reformed religion, and are of differing sentiments only in things not so clear, nor of that moment as those wherein they consent, should still be opposite parties."† Such has been the lamentation of all true christians from the days of these great and good men to the present moment ; yet sects and parties have continued to multiply, divisions and subdivisions have been extended, as though the church of Christ were infinitely divisible ; and a spirit of contention has been kept up, as if between the parts there were an eternal repulsion.

Strange indeed ! that christians, whose very profession constitutes a bond of union, whose divine master has taught them that

* Discourse on Diversity of Opinion, &c. † Works, p. 819.

their love to one another will be the test of their discipleship to him, and whose religion inculcates the spirit of love and charity, as an indispensable qualification for heaven, should yet deliberately act from an opposite spirit, judging, censuring, avoiding and reviling one another, and this too on account of religious opinions which all have an equal right to form for themselves, and none the least authority to control in others. Strange to astonishment, indeed ! that those should persist in this fatal error, who glory in being reformed from it ; that protestants, in the full light and liberty of the gospel, avowing the equal right of all to free inquiry, private judgment, and honest profession ; and, consequently, their own obligation to receive all as brethren, who conscientiously manifest their christian faith ; should thus trample on the laws of brotherly love, in the face of their own declared principles. What inconsistency ! What delusion ! When will christians learn the spirit of their religion ? When will protestants act upon their avowed principles ? What but a practical and consistent adherence to this spirit, and to these principles, can restore the blessings of peace and unity to the church of Christ, and ensure to the gospel a complete triumph ?

Here, then, is an object, worthy of our constant efforts and prayers. Let us promote it by every means in our power, and especially by our example. Let us resolve to be protestants indeed, as well as in name. Let us regard integrity of conscience, not sameness of opinion, as the true christian bond of union, and embrace as brethren all who conscientiously follow what they believe to be the doctrine of the gospel, and repel none from our communion, “ that love our Lord Jesus Christ in sincerity.” Let no mere differences of opinion embitter our affections, or obstruct the flow of our charity. In the words of an eminent and devoted servant of Christ, addressed to one of a very different persuasion from himself, “ let the points wherein we differ, stand aside ; there are enough wherein we agree, enough to be the ground of every christian temper, and of every christian action.—If we cannot as yet *think alike* in all things, at least we may *love alike*. Herein we cannot possibly do

amiss. For of one point none can doubt a moment, God is love; and he that dwelleth in love, dwelleth in God, and God in him.”*

Thus, christian brethren, for so we must be allowed to address you, we have endeavored to collect and lay before you such statements and considerations, as might lead you to clearer views of the mutual rights and duties of christians, and to a deeper abhorrence of that exclusive, uncharitable spirit which is opposed to them all. The dark, antichristian character of this spirit is manifest from its past history; and is there anything to brighten the prospect of its future progress? Suppose its mode of operation changed, will not its nature and its object remain essentially the same? And can it produce better fruits by means of exclusions, denunciations and anathemas, than by fines, imprisonments and tortures? Religion has as little affinity with the one as the other. Truth and piety can no more be promoted by destroying a man’s usefulness, reputation, or peace of mind, than by maiming or burning his body. Even the poor reward of uniformity cannot be attained by all these or any other means of coercion. Bishop Taylor is not too strong in his expression, when he says that he who attempts to prevent variety of opinions is “like him who claps his shoulder to the ground to stop an earthquake;” nor Chillingworth, when he declares that “taking away diversity of opinions touching matters of religion, is not to be hoped for without a miracle.”

Let, then, this evil spirit itself be banished from the hearts of christians. All who would be true disciples of Jesus, and ‘followers of God as dear children,’ must be filled with brotherly love, and actuated by the divine principles of charity and freedom which the gospel inculcates. How easily would they then follow the eminent divine last named, and “learn to set a higher value upon those great points of faith and obedience wherein they agree, than upon those of less moment wherein they differ; and understand that agreement in those ought to be more effectual to join them in one communion, than their difference in other things

* Wesley to a Roman Catholic—Works, v. 9, p. 535.

of less moment to divide them." You have seen how earnestly the wisest and most devout christians of other times pleaded for this, and with what generous sentiments of christian liberty and benevolence they were animated. Will not their example of charity rise in judgment against this generation? Are not many of us wanting in these noble sentiments? Are not some of us relapsing into that very spirit of antichrist, which they so resolutely opposed? Yet these distinguished worthies were far from enjoying our advantages for improvement. Many of them lived in times of comparative darkness, and could but imperfectly understand the rights of conscience. Hence they were sometimes led to encourage or countenance a violation of these rights in others; and were not always able to act and speak consistently with their general principles. This, with the light of our times, and our institutions, they would be the first to see and lament. Could they now speak to us, how full of heavenly peace would be their voice! How affectionately would they warn us to avoid their errors, and never to forget the saviour's law of love!

Baxter* has given us some faint idea of this, in the speech which he has supposed that his friend Owen, who departed before him, would address to the disputers in religion whom he left behind, could he have spoken to them from his heavenly rest. And we know not how we can better take our present leave of you, than with this heaven-breathing address.

"Though all believers must be holy, and avoid all known wilful sin, they must not avoid one another, or their communion in good, because of adherent faults and imperfections; for Christ, who is most holy, receiveth persons and worship that are faulty, else none of us should be received. There is greatest goodness where there is greatest love and unity of spirit, maintained in the bond of peace. O call not to God to deny you mercy, by being unmerciful; nor to cast you all out, by casting off one another. O separate not all from Christ's church on earth, lest you separate from him, or displease him. God hath

* See Orme's *Life and Times of Richard Baxter*, v. 2, p. 184.

bid you pray, but not told you whether it shall be oft in the same words, or in other ; with a book or without a book. Make not superstitiously a religion by pretending that God hath determined such circumstances. O do not preach and write down love and communion of saints, on pretence that your little modes and ways only are good, and theirs idolatrous or intolerable ; and do not slander and excommunicate all, or almost all, Christ's body, and then wrong God by fathering this upon him. You pray, 'Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven ;' why, here is no strife, division, disunion, animosity, sects, or factions, nor separating from, or excommunicating, one another. Learn of Christ, and separate from none further than they separate from him, and receive all that he receiveth. While you blame canonical dividers and unjust excommunicators, do not you renounce communion with tenfold more than they. I was, in this, of too narrow, mistaken principles ; and, in the time of temptation I did not foresee to what church confusion and desolation, hatred and ruin, the dividing practices of some did tend ; but the glorious unity, in heavenly perfection of love to God and one another, bids me beseech you to avoid all that is against it, and to make use of no mistakes of mine to cherish any such offences, or to oppose the motions of love, unity and peace."

In behalf of the Church of the First Congregational Society in Salem,

D. A. WHITE,
H. DEVEREUX,

Committee.

February 18, 1832.

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